CHANCE—AND THE WOMAN

ELLIS MIDDLETON

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A ROMANCE

BY

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TO

MY SISTER

CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
I.	Tells How Chance Jested with Mr. Stephen Burgoyne	1
II.	Wherein Stephen Arbitrates Betwixt a Viscount and a Tinker	14
III.	Wherein Lord Alverford Unfolds a Madcap Plot	29
IV.	Shows How Easily Comedy Can Develop Into Tragedy	47
V.	Finds and Leaves Stephen in Dire Straits	59
VI.	Describes the Colonel's Mortification, the Sergeant's Dilemma, and Lady Averill's Triumph	76
VII.	Tells How Lord Alverford Receives a Mysterious Visitor	95
VIII.	Wherein Lady Averill Defies the Colonel and Befriends Stephen	109
IX.	In Which Sir Randolph Shows His Hand More Plainly Than Is Wise	124
X.	Relates What Chanced on the Way to Darnchester Gaol	139

CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
XI.	Tells How a Corinthian Dined with a Tinker, a Quack, and a Thief	157
XII.	Wherein Carless Takes Precautions and Stephen Makes a Vow	174
XIII.	Renders Stephen's Vow Vastly Difficult of Redemption	189
XIV.	Relates How Stephen and Sir Randolph Gorst Fought for a Peculiar Prize	209
XV.	Places Stephen in a Sorry Dilemma	226
XVI.	In Which a Handkerchief Plays a Momentous Part	245
XVII.	Tells How Stephen Again Found Himself Captive	253
XVIII.	In Which the Colonel Is First Worried, Then Amused, and Last of All Mystified	267
XIX.	Brings Tears to Lady Averill and Joy to Stephen	279
XX.	Tells How Lady Averill Outwitted Sir Randolph Gorst	291
XXI.	Tells of Grim Happenings in Greypool Wood	307
XXII.	Wherein Jerry Dodd Experiences an Eventful Evening	317
XXIII.	Tells How Carless Came Just Too Late to Pay His Debt	336
XXIV.	Brings the Tale to an End	351

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CHAPTER I

TELLS HOW CHANCE JESTED WITH MR. STEPHEN BURGOYNE

THE blacksmith straightened his broad back, and shook his head solemnly as he transferred his gaze from the horse's fetlock, which he had been examining, to the high-bred, handsome face of the gentleman in the blue coat who stood impatiently tapping his dusty top-boots with his riding-whip.

"It's not a bit o'use, sir," he said. "He'll none be fit to carry you for a week or more. It's a tidy bad sprain, I doubt."

"Humph! I feared as much," responded his customer gloomily. "'Tis a pestilent misfortune, for I am due in London within the week."

"London, sir!" echoed the smith, opening his blue eyes wide. "Why, you're nigh on half a day's ride inside th' Lancashire border, and I reckon London's a tidy long way fro' Lancashire. It'll be a fair while afore that horse o' yours'll be ready for such a journey as yon."

The gentleman in the blue coat made no reply, but stared abstractedly out through the open door at the dusty road. The frown of perplexity which made two well-defined furrows between his brows in no wise detracted from his good looks, adding rather to the suggestion of strength of character which shone in his steadfast grey

eyes and which was confirmed by the set of his clean square jaws and close-lipped mouth. His tall figure, with its broad back and slim waist, was accentuated by the perfect cut of his coat, and his buckskins fitted without crease or wrinkle from hip to boots.

For once in a way Mr. Stephen Burgoyne was a prey to indecision. Having behaved that day in a manner more befitting a boy of eighteen than a man of well-nigh thirty summers, he in consequence found himself stranded in a village of which he did not even know the name; and he at length confessed to himself that it served him right! And having thus shouldered the blame, he wasted no time in self-commiseration, but decided to set about making the best of the situation.

"What is this place called?" he asked.

"Bolderburn, sir," replied the smith.

The name seemed familiar, but, although Mr. Burgoyne pondered it awhile, the circumstances in which he had previously heard it eluded his memory.

"Meseems, then, 'tis in Bolderburn I shall have to rest content—for tonight, at all events. There is an inn here which accommodates travellers, I presume?"

"Aye, sir, and not a better i' all England," declared the smith emphatically. "The Nag's Head is happen a bit old-looking and weather-scarred, but it's a gradely house for all that, and a favorite calling-place with the gentry as live round these parts. Tom Hindle keeps it, and what Tom doesn't know about th' brewing o' ale's not worth knowing."

"And does that account for the popularity of his inn?" enquired Mr. Burgoyne idly.

"Aye, that it does! There's nobody has a properer taste for good ale than gentlefolk; and though you'll happen not believe me, sir, it's none so long since th' Prince himself stopped there and supped two pints o' Tom's ale within ten minutes, for I seed him do it with my own eyes."

"I'm not surprised at that if the ale be as good as you say it is," laughed Mr. Burgoyne. "The only thing that astonishes me is that he didn't make it three, for I chance to be acquainted with His Royal Highness."

The smith stared at him incredulously. "You know th' Prince!" he said, in wonderment. "D'ye mean to say as you know him to—to speak to?"

"I have that honor—though mayhap 'tis a somewhat doubtful one," returned Mr. Burgoyne drily.

"Well, now, whoever would ha' thought it!" exclaimed the smith. "Who'd ha' thought o' me, Jim Thistleton, standing here chatting casual-like to a friend o' th' Prince's! I reckon as you must be a dook, or some'at o' th' sort, sir."

"No, I am merely a commoner like yourself. Burgoyne is my name, and I have no title other than plain Mister."

The smith picked up a small hand-hammer and struck several aimless blows on his anvil before he replied.

"You gentry must have your little joke," he commented, at length. "You'll scarce be expecting me to believe as th' Prince makes friends o' folk as isn't even lords."

"Yet he has named me so on more than one occasion. Consequently, men have counted me unduly favored of fortune; for my own part, methinks there is room for debate on the point," said Mr. Burgoyne whimsically. "However, I must seek a lodging. Think you I can get proper care and attention for my horse at the Nag's Head?"

"Surely you can. Tom Hindle's son Jack took to hosses from th' day he were born just like a duck takes to water, and he'll cure yon sprain quicker'n anybody I knows on."

"Good. Then I'll seek him at once."

Mr. Burgoyne led his limping horse out of the smithy and down the road. He had no difficulty in finding the Nag's Head, which was only about thirty yards away, and which stood out from the clustering cottages by virtue of

its size and appearance and the remarkable sign which hung over its low doorway.

This sign is worthy of some little description. It purported to illustrate the name of the house and to be a representation of the head of a noble Arab steed; but surely such an extraordinary horse had never been foaled by any mare outside Bedlam! The animal portrayed was apparently a skewbald of bright chestnut and white, in addition to which combination of colors it possessed several by-no-means-negligible spots of slate grey. Its eyes, which, doubtless to match huge and fiery nostrils, revealed an ominous amount of white, were of a vivid and awe-inspiring azure blue; and its lips were drawn back tightly to expose to the wondering public gaze a set of perfect and regular teeth which would have been a distinct adornment to the mouth of a lady of fashion, but which were somewhat out of place between the jaws of a horse.

The landlord, Tom Hindle, was inordinately—albeit unreasonably—proud of this sign. It was comparatively new, and had been painted by an unknown artist who had chanced to call at the inn one fine summer morning for the purpose of lubricating a parched throat. After one draught of the famous ale he had promptly made the landlord an offer to repaint the then indecipherable sign on condition that his mug was kept replenished during his arduous labors. At first Hindle had not seemed enamored of his magnanimity; but the artist had proceeded to resolve his doubts by darkly hinting that he was infinitely more renowned for his talents than was Sir Thomas Lawrence, and was wandering incognito through the North of England in search of subjects in landscape and figure.

The result was that Hindle succumbed to the artist's blandishments, and the artist succumbed to Hindle's ale. Whether it was that the day was unduly hot or the artist's throat incredibly dry is a matter for conjecture, but the landlord was wont to boast that the Royal Academician (!)

had worked from noon to dusk at his task, and that during that period he emptied his pint pot no less than twenty-three times! Hindle also recounted with gusto the fact that before painting the eyes of the noble quadruped the artist had to be revived with a bucketful of cold water applied externally, which possibly accounted for their unusual color and their abnormal squint.

Mr. Burgoyne's approach did not go unmarked. A tall, slim man, clad in breeches and cloth gaiters and a long-pointed canary-colored waistcoat, stood bareheaded and coatless leaning against one side of the open gateway to the inn yard. He scrutinized the lame horse with appraising eyes, vouchsafing but a casual glance to its owner, what time he effortlessly turned a straw with full red lips and curled a silky whisker with the horny fingers of his right hand. As Mr. Burgoyne halted before him, he abandoned his lounging attitude, and took a step forward, but he still kept his eyes fixed steadfastly on the animal.

"My horse has gone lame," volunteered Mr. Burgoyne pleasantly, "and I am compelled to seek shelter and rest for him. Are you by any chance the Mr. Jack Hindle of whom the smith told me?"

"Aye," returned the other, spitting out his straw and replacing it with another which chanced to be within reach.

"Then you will probably know as well as I do what my horse requires?"

"Better," asserted the landlord's son impassively.

"Hum! You are not without assurance, though you are deuced curt of speech," said Mr. Burgoyne, slightly ruffled. "Anyway, I'll leave him in your care until I have broken my fast, and by that time you will perhaps be able to tell me how long it will be before he is fit for me to ride."

"Tell you now. Fortnight."

"A fortnight!" echoed Mr. Burgoyne in dismay. "Pre-

posterous! I cannot leave him here for two whole weeks. 'Tis quite impossible!"

"Fortnight," repeated Hindle with finality; and, like one who has propounded a fact that admits of no argument, he took hold of the horse's bridle and promptly led him away from his nonplussed owner. Mr. Burgoyne's eyes followed his retreating steed until they saw him disappear into a loose-box, and then, with a short laugh of vexation, he turned away and entered the inn.

Neither the landlord nor his wife was in evidence when Mr. Burgoyne entered the building; but his immediate needs were gratified by a very pretty and very efficient serving maid, and it was not long before he was comfortably ensconced in a private sitting-room in the enjoyment of a well-cooked and substantial repast.

And he had barely finished his meal when the landlord himself bustled in with a bottle of wine which he had ordered. Tom Hindle was a rotund man with a large, good-humored red face, and he did not in the slightest degree resemble his tall, taciturn son either in looks or manner. As became the proprietor of a popular house of refreshment, he was urbane and interestingly talkative, and he now approached his guest full of apologies for his failure to welcome him upon his arrival.

"Me and th' missis was away over to Mansfield to buy a few oddments," he explained. "I hope as you've been attended to proper, sir."

"I have lacked for naught," smiled Mr. Burgoyne. "Yet I am anxious about my horse. He has strained a ligament of his off foreleg between knee and fetlock, and he will need every care to put him right again within a reasonable time."

"Aye, my lad Jack told me about him just now. You've no need to worry your head over him, sir; he's in good hands. Jack hasn't got th' gift o' th' gab, but there isn't a cleverer lad wi' hosses i' Lancashire—no, nor i' Yorkshire neither,

though I says it as is his father. Are you going to stay here till your hoss is well again, sir?"

Such an idea had not hitherto occurred to Mr. Burgoyne, and he hesitated before answering. "No, I think not," he said slowly. "Your son tells me that 'twill be a fortnight ere he is fit for the road, and I know not how I should pass the time until then. Besides, I ought to be in London by the end of the week. So I think my best plan will be to start out by coach tomorrow, and to send for my horse in two or three weeks' time. However, I will tell you my plans in the morning."

Left to himself, Mr. Burgoyne went over in his mind the events of the day. And if his face were an index to his thoughts, their recollection gave him little pleasure, for the longer he mused the deeper became the frown on his broad brow. It would have been patent to anyone who had seen him as he sat there puffing at a long clay pipe that he was the prey of irritation—an irritation intensified by the knowledge that his recent conduct had been inexcusably foolish and impulsive for a man of the world and one who prided himself upon his coolness of judgment.

The facts were these. Mr. Burgoyne had been on a visit to his only living relative, an uncle who resided near Kendal and who had been dangerously ill; but, after seeing the old man well on the way to convalescence, he had set off south again towards London, where he occupied bachelor apartments in a fashionable quarter. He had despatched his heavy luggage by the mail, carrying with him in his saddle-bags only such articles as were indispensable to a horseman with a long journey before him.

On the second day of his ride, after a hearty breakfast at the hostelry in which he had slept overnight, he had taken the road blithe of heart and rejoicing in the glories of a perfect spring morning. He felt that fortune was smiling upon him, for, apart from his outward journey, he had never

been so far north before, and he had pictured Lancashire as a bleak and barren county upon which the sun seldom shone, and where snow and fog held sway for the greater part of the year. It may be that the wine of the northern spring had got into his blood, or perhaps it was that the lilting song of mating birds awakened in his heart something which had hitherto slept; but, whatever the primary cause, Mr. Burgoyne suddenly found himself with a mind obsessed by a disturbing tumult of thought which refused to be banished.

He had been in the saddle for about an hour, and was trotting along in great content, when he observed, standing by the roadside some distance ahead of him, two horses. Their riders had dismounted, and, as Mr. Burgoyne approached, he saw that one of them, a groom, was engaged in remedying a trifling defect in the harness of one of the animals. A yard or two away, awaiting the completion of his task, stood a woman, evidently a lady of quality, whose graceful and unstudied pose at once riveted Mr. Burgoyne's attention.

Her head was averted, but the direct rays of the sun struck upon a moderately tall figure clad in a perfectly cut riding-habit of deep plum color. The lovely contours of the full rounded bosom and curving hips were cleanly defined by the tailored garments, and might have belonged to a sculptor's model. Mr. Burgoyne involuntarily checked his horse to a walk, in the hope that he might catch a glimpse of the face which went with this wonderful shape—at the same time steeling himself against the disappointment which his worldly wisdom warned him would surely follow the gratification of his desire.

But for once his worldly wisdom had played him false. Almost immediately, attracted by the sound of his horse's hoofs, the lady turned her eyes in his direction, and Mr. Burgoyne, inured as he was to radiant visions of feminine

loveliness, positively gasped, for he beheld the face of his secret dreams. Here was his ideal woman in the flesh; and he so far forgot himself and his manners as to stare at her with wide-open eyes thenceforward until his horse had passed her.

And, indeed, there was much excuse for his unmannerly behavior. Her face was full, and complexioned like a rose-leaf, its delicate coloring overlaid with a slight tan. Her heavily lashed eyes, set wide apart under dark, straight brows, were the color of new-born violets, and the little curls which had escaped from under her black hat shone in the sunlight like strands of burnished gold. Her nose was short and straight, and if her beauty had a flaw it was in the mouth, which was rather too wide for perfection, but which was full-lipped and firm, and red and alluring as a ripe cherry.

Just now, however, her glance was cold and her bearing haughty. She was used to admiration, but she resented Mr. Burgoyne's unblinking stare, deeming it due to the boldness of the libertine; and the curl of her lips and the manner in which she tapped the palm of her left gauntlet with her riding-whip left him in no doubt as to her hastily-formed opinion of him, for he was wise in his knowledge of feminine storm-signals, and knew that he had sinned grievously.

Nevertheless, he rode away from her with her image stamped indelibly on his mind; and he must needs give his imagination rein to play about the memory of her lovely face. For all its proud haughtiness, he could picture that face melting into ineffable tenderness. He could see those cold eyes swimming with tender love-light for some thrice-blessed male, and those scornful lips pouting adorably to receive his kiss.

For the remainder of the morning he rode forward engrossed in the building of dream castles, until at length he awoke to the fact that he was on the outskirts of a town.

The sight of the streets and houses banished his dreams and filled him with a vague discontent, for was he not leaving behind him the green and fragrant country in which dwelt that adorable woman, to bury himself in a drab city of bricks and mortar wherein he could never hope to meet her?

Was there among all the vaunted town's belles one half so glorious as she? Where lay the sense in his returning to the round of inane gaiety which had long since ceased to hold any pleasure for him? What delight did it give him to be one of the Prince's boon companions in his crazy excursions to Brighton? Did not the sycophants who fawned upon him in the hope of profit fill him with contempt, and was he not heartily tired of those Bacchanalian feasts from which it was considered a disgrace to go home sober? All these and a thousand like questions he asked himself as he sat at table in the posting-house at which he had stopped to lunch, with the result that when he again got to saddle he turned his horse's nose towards the north instead of in his original direction.

His determination to retrace his steps was born of impulse even as he had lifted foot to stirrup in the act of mounting, but, once having been taken, it became fixed and unalterable as granite. He cursed himself for an impetuous fool, and reason demanded of him what he hoped to gain by his folly. He might just as well try to discover the bag of gold at the foot of a rainbow or to capture one of those swift-moving martins that winged their glorious flight through the clean warm air as to make the acquaintance of the woman whose beauty had intoxicated him, and who had scattered his calm and somewhat detached outlook on life to the four winds. Yet all the while his horse bore him steadily back to the spot where he had seen her, and at every bend and twist in the road his heart leapt within him

at the possibility that he might, within the next moment or so, encounter her.

At length he came abreast the place where she had stood. He had no doubts as to its position, for it was clearly photographed in his brain; and he dismounted with an eagerness and alacrity foreign to his nature. What he hoped to find there he probably could not have told, but he searched all round about him with the thoroughness of a housewife looking for a lost guinea. But the only sign of her former presence which rewarded him was the mark of one of the little heels of her riding-boots in the soft turf; otherwise he found not so much as a hairpin.

Vaguely disappointed—though why he should be he did not know—he stood for awhile absently stroking his horse's nose and wondering as to his next step. Should he continue north or should he resume his interrupted journey Londonwards? It did not take him long to decide. He had already lost nearly a day in pursuit of a whim, and to waste any more time thus would be indulging folly too far. Tomorrow the woman he had seen would be just a pleasant memory; next week he would have forgotten her very existence. He would get him on his way at once, and banish from his mind the siren whose loveliness had made him temporarily deaf to the call of home. With a short laugh of self-contempt he mounted; and at this juncture Chance intervened, as she so often does.

For, no matter how carefully plans may be formed or contingencies foreseen, man is, in the main, powerless to control his own fate. More often than not, the things that make life beautiful—a man's honor, a woman's love, a child's life—lie in the hollow of the careless hand of Chance, the jester.

Preoccupied, Stephen had failed to notice that the grass bordering the road was hereabouts honeycombed with rabbit-holes, and almost before he was settled in his seat his

horse put a foot in one of them, and nearly threw him. And he had not gone many more paces before he realised that the animal was limping. A cursory examination of the off foreleg convinced him that it behoved him to seek the nearest inn and to rest his horse until the morning in the hope that the injury would prove less serious than he feared; and, as it chanced, he had little over half a mile to walk before he came upon the smithy in Bolderburn village.

And now, as Mr. Burgoyne recalled all this, the humor of the situation struck him, and he laughed aloud. Who among his friends in town would believe the story if ever he told it? The idea that Stephen Burgoyne—Corinthian of Corinthians, arbiter of fashion, known far and wide as impervious to feminine wiles and charms—would hunt the countryside for the further sight of a woman whom he had glimpsed but for a fleeting minute would be incredible to all who knew him; and it was this thought that smoothed the frown from his brow and revived his drooping spirits.

After all, why should he not linger awhile in this village? 'Twas a pleasant enough place; and if the food which he had just eaten and the wine which stood at his elbow were any criterion, the inn was beyond reproach. Furthermore, he was decidedly reluctant to leave his horse in strange hands for an indefinite period. There was not a finer animal in the country, and Stephen was one of those men who count their horses as comrades only a tithe less dear than their closest friends.

No, he was damned if he would leave him to the mercies of that taciturn fool of an innkeeper's son, without first having ascertained the full extent of his injuries and making sure that the man knew how to treat them. He would at least rest himself content at the Nag's Head for a day or two to see how he fared; and—who knew?—perhaps in the meantime he might get some clue to the identity of the lady he had seen. Surely it would not be difficult to find some-

thing in the neighborhood to distract him; he had in his younger days been passionately fond of the country, although of late years he had seen but little of it.

His mind made up, Stephen Burgoyne drank the remainder of his wine, and picked up his hat and riding-whip with the intention of enjoying the fine spring evening.

But as he stepped into the outer air a loud shout arrested him, and he stood staring before him in blank astonishment.

CHAPTER II

WHEREIN STEPHEN ARBITRATES BETWIXT A VISCOUNT AND A TINKER

ABOUT fifty yards away to the north of the inn the road rose in a fairly steep incline until it disappeared over the crest of a hill. Coming down this slope at a break-neck pace was a travelling tinker's cart, with the fastest-moving donkey between the shafts that Stephen had ever beheld. Seated postilion-wise astride the donkey, with his long legs stretching outside the shafts, rode a very elegant young man, attired in a fashionable coat of sage-green, whose cravat was so high that he could scarce move his head, and whose Hessian boots shone resplendent as a mirror.

The din which cart and driver contrived to make between them was indescribable. The pots and pans with which the vehicle was laden clattered and clanged in a most alarming manner, and every now and then some tin or iron vessel would escape from its moorings and precipitate itself on to the road with a resounding crash, where, as often as not it would bowl along on its edge behind the cart. The postilion, sitting well back in his uncomfortable seat and waving above his head a tasselled cane, yelled at the top of his voice a mixture of hunting cries and coaching objurgations, and the echoes resounded to cries of "Yoicks! Tally Ho! Curse your perishing eyes! Hark away! Faster, you three-legged snail!"—until the inhabitants of an adjacent rookery, peaceably engaged in preparing themselves for

slumber, rose in a black cloud over the tree-tops and added a thousand hoarse, angry "Caws" to the racket below.

Away in the distance a small, gesticulating figure ran as fast as its legs could go in a valiant but futile endeavor to overtake the cart. This Stephen took to be the tinker himself; but, although the distressed tradesman had his mouth wide open and was evidently protesting with the full force of his lungs against the use to which his belongings were being put, he was quite outdone in his vocal efforts by the debonair postilion, for not a syllable of what he said reached Stephen's ears.

In a very short space of time the ungainly vehicle, which travelled first on one wheel and then on the other, and which was only kept from overturning by a miracle, came opposite the inn; and the donkey, recognizing the house as one at which he had never hitherto failed to halt, refused to create a precedent on this occasion, and suddenly stiffened his legs and planted all four feet rigidly on the ground. The impetus of the cart behind him and the abruptness of his stoppage caused him to skid for some yards before he came to a complete standstill, when, obviously none the worse for his unwonted exercise, he stood complacently regarding the sprawling figure of his late rider, who had been pitched head foremost on to a grassy patch at the side of the highway.

The unexpected and inglorious manner in which the postilion's escapade had been cut short, and the apparently self-satisfied attitude of his late steed, made a keen and instantaneous appeal to Stephen's sense of humor, and he put back his head and roared with uncontrollable laughter. Immediately the young man on the grass sat up, and, fumbling for his glass, which was fortunately unbroken by his fall, he subjected the hilarious gentleman to a haughty and indignant stare. Noting, however, that his silent disapproval, far from checking the observer's merriment, seemed only to increase it, he addressed him in mild and gentle tones

which were in singular contrast to the ear-splitting yells in which he had but a moment ago been indulging.

"Sir! You there! Blind me and blister me, can't ya hear me, fellow? Are ya deaf, ya insolent knave? How dare ya laugh at me, ya bluebottle? Ya bray worse than that pestilent ass, 'od rot his nose and his bones! Nay, spike me and splinter me if ya aren't doin' the braying for the pair of ya, damme! D'ya hear me? 'Tis no use; the fellow is incorrigible," he continued, with a soft sigh. "His blood be upon his own head; I shall be compelled to chastise him."

He fingered his right shoulder gingerly, pulled one sleeve of his coat round to examine the dusty cloth at the elbow, glanced ruefully at the soiled knees of his breeches, and, with a stifled groan, rose to his feet. Once upright, he ran his hand over his fair, curly head in a dazed manner, and then limped, his fists tight clenched, towards where Stephen awaited him. His intention was unmistakable; but Stephen, whose hilarity had subsided to a broad smile, straightened his body, which had been bent in the throes of laughter, and held out his hand in friendly greeting.

"My heartiest thanks, Harry," he cried gaily. " 'Twas the most diverting incident I have witnessed for many a long day; I had never hoped for such entertainment hereabouts."

The dishevelled young dandy gazed at him blankly for a moment, and then broke forth again in his gentle voice: "Pink me and perish me if it isn't Stephen Burgoyne! How are ya, Steve? Most infernal disappointing, though, to find I know ya, what? Had hoped for a pretty mill when I heard ya laughing. Bumped my head when that Satanic ass pitched me; made my vision a bit dim, what?—and I didn't recognize ya. But I think ya owe me a round or two for all that amusement. Eh? What d'ya say now, Steve?"

"I say no, thank you, Harry. I'm grateful for the spectacle, but I'm not going to pay you for it by fighting you

just now. But 'twas a gallant progress you were making, and worthy of your talent for originality—though methinks the donkey had the better of it in the end."

"Aye, perdition take him, methinks so, too," he replied, working his shoulder slowly up and down to make sure that no bones were broken. "He bubbled me neatly just as I was beginning to enjoy myself."

But at this moment the little tinker appeared before him, spent and breathing heavily, but with the light of battle shining from fierce eyes.

"Put 'em up, me buck, and put 'em up slick," he cried, "else I'll lam ye one. I'll spile yer beauty for ye, I will—aye, an' yer fine clothes too, ye thievin' scallywag! Come on now, if ye don't want me to lam ye one right on yer ugly nose."

The young man eyed him through his uplifted monocle as he might have eyed an angry, buzzing fly. " 'Pon my soul and honor, Steve, the fellow wants to fight me!" he drawled, in slow astonishment. "Now, if he were six inches taller and six inches wider I should be most happy to oblige him, but he's too small to hit, what?"

"Too small, am I?" yelled the tinker, fairly dancing with rage. "I'm big enough to eat your sort, I am, you long bean-pole you. I could bre'kfus off three like you, I could, wivout sp'iling me appetite"—and he sprang forwards, fists uplifted, with the evident intention of totally annihilating the man who had laid sacrilegious hands on his beloved donkey.

But Stephen's hand shot out and seized him by the shoulder before he could strike a blow. "Come, my friend, there's no call for violence," he said, so pleasantly that the tinker hesitated and looked up at his smiling face doubtfully. "You are exhausted from your run, and doubtless thirsty; what do you say to stepping indoors and sampling the landlord's ale with me?"

"Aye, I'm thirsty all right; I could drink a barrel, I

could, swelp me!" agreed the tinker. "But I ain't a-goin' to 'ave no ale till I've settled wiv this 'ere cove, I ain't. He stole me donkey, 'e did, and made 'im gallop as 'e ain't never done afore. The pore thing won't never recover from it, never; why, I ain't seen 'im even trot more'n 'arf a dozen times since I got 'im three years ago, let alone gallop like a blood mare."

Stephen laughed. "Nonsense; your donkey is none the worse for his exercise," he said. "Look at him; he is perfectly happy and undistressed, and I've no doubt he feels highly pleased with himself at the clever way in which he got rid of his rider."

The anger disappeared from the tinker's brow, and he grinned with satisfaction. "Aye, 'e knows a thing or two, does Adam," he said, gazing at the donkey with eyes full of affection. " 'E ain't travelled all over England wiv me for nothink, not likely 'e ain't. But becos' Adam give this 'ere cove wot he deserved, that don't settle my grudge again' this 'ere cove, it don't," he concluded obstinately.

"Then come inside and settle it there. You can each of you give me your version of what occurred, and I'll give you my opinion of what ought to be done."

Without waiting for a reply, Stephen turned and led the way into an empty public room to the left of the hall, followed in very leisurely fashion by the young dandy. The tinker, fearful lest his enemy should attempt to escape, took it upon himself to bring up the rear, and within a minute or two the three men were seated round a small table engaged in quenching their respective thirsts. That of the tinker was evidently considerable, for he emptied his pint tankard without drawing breath, and had disposed of a good half of the contents of another before he sat back in his seat in readiness for the discussion.

"Now, my friend, as you appear to be the aggrieved party, let us have your tale first," said Stephen, as solemnly as though he were sitting in judgment in the High Court.

"Right ye are; 'ere goes, sir. About a quarter of an hour since, me an' Adam was a-restin' at the top o' that 'ere 'ill up the road, us 'aving been walking all this blessed day, and bein' near paralyzed wiv that blisterin' climb at the end of it. Ornerally we shouldn't 'ave stopped there, not when there was a pub in sight; but I remembered suddink as I 'ad a pan as 'ad a little 'ole in it, and I thought I'd better mend it afore I got into Bolderburn, for chance as anybody 'appened to take a fancy to that 'ere pertic'ler pan. These 'ere north-country folk is very perverse, d'ye see, and they allus arsks for somethink as ye 'aven't got, or else they falls in love wiv the only thing on yer cart as ain't perfeck, an' won't be satisfied wiv nothink else. An' yer daresn't sell 'em anythink as isn't perfeck; if they don't find out as it's not as it should be afore ye've gone, they waits for ye comin' again, an' then if ye gets off wiv nothink worse'n a broken 'ead—why, ye're lucky. All o' which makes it 'ard for honest tradesmen, sir. Did ye ever 'ear what 'appened to Jos Winterbottom, 'im as they used to call Lucky Jos afore he took to bein' a cut-purse an' got 'isself transported?"

"No, I can't say that I have heard the story," replied Stephen, thoroughly enjoying himself.

"I'm surprised at that, sir; 'e wus a great man wus Jos, an' I didn't think as there wus anybody as 'adn't 'eard 'ow 'e sold Daft Sarah a kettle. Jos peddled these parts afore I took over 'is round an' one day, about eight or nine year ago, 'e stopped at a wayside cottage on the edge o' the Yorkshire moors. Poppin' 'is 'ead inside the door, 'e axed nice an' perlite—'e wus allus very perlite, was Jos—if there wus anythink wanted in the way o' pots or pans. Jos 'ad called at that cottage on every journey for years, an' 'ad never sold nothink; but 'e wus a persistent feller, wus Jos—one o' them coves as they calls optumists— an' 'e wus never discouraged, an' made a p'int o' calling on everybody as wouldn't buy, 'im 'aving the notion as 'e wus bound to

sell 'em somethink if 'e waited long enough. An' sure enough, on this pertic'ler day Sarah come out an' said as she wus needin' a kettle. Jos grinned with triump', an' told 'er as 'e 'ad the finest collection o' kettles as ever wus seen. 'E showed 'er big kettles, little kettles, an' medium kettles, but Sarah wus hard to please an' wouldn't 'ave none o' 'em. Sarah wus a little old woman well over seventy, wiv a face as lined an' wrinkled as a shrivelled apple, an' folks reckoned as she wus daft; but if she *wus* daft it wus a rum sort o' daftness. Anyway, this time she 'ad set 'er 'eart on a copper kettle, an' nothink else would suit 'er. Now, Jos 'ad only one copper kettle on 'is cart, an' that 'ad 'ad its spout broke orf. O' course, it 'ad bin mended, but Jos wus a bit too full o' ale when 'e did it, an' it still leaked a bit. But as Sarah wanted a copper kettle Jos perduced this article, an' Sarah at once fell in love wiv it. Jos, seeing as the wind wus blowin' favorable an' reckonin' on Sarah's daftness, said promp' as it wus the best kettle outside London; an' what wiv 'is oily tongue an' Sarah's 'eart bein' set on copper, it wus not long afore 'e 'ad sold it for twice as much as it wus worth, an' 'e wus on 'is way rejoicin', so to speak."

"Now, stap me and strike me if I didn't think ya were going to state ya case against me, and here ya go giving a lecture on confounded kettles, damme," interposed the enemy, with a yawn. "Why don't ya tell Mr. Burgoyne what I did to ya' beastly donkey, what?"

"Lor' love me boots! ain't I a-tellin' of 'im?" cried the tinker indignantly. "It's me as is doin' the speechifyin' just now, me buck, an' I'll thank ye to keep yer tongue still till ye get yer turn."

"You are ruled out of order, Harry," said Stephen solemnly. "Proceed, sir."

"Where wus I? Oh, yes, I know. Jos, bein' a leary cove, didn't go nigh Sarah for over twelve months, but one fine spring mornin' 'e thought 'e'd risk it. So 'e stops

'is cart, an' shoves 'is face round the door all merry an' bright as usual, but afore 'e could say a word somethink 'it 'im an orful wallop right on the top o' the 'ead, an' down 'e goes unconscious on the floor. 'E found out arterwards that it was Sarah 'erself as 'ad 'it 'im wiv the copper kettle 'e 'ad sold 'er. Next thing she did wus to get a brawny young feller as wus working close by to pick Jos up an' throw 'im into the ditch, an' then she dropped a few pebbles inside the kettle an' tied it to 'is donkey's tail. Not content wiv that, she gave that pore donkey two or three cuts wiv a hazel switch, though *'e* 'adn't done 'er no 'arm. Naterally, that set 'im orf trottin', an' when 'e moved, them pebbles began to rattle in that kettle in a unnateral sort o' way. The donkey, 'im bein' a nervouser animal nor usual, was skeered, an set orf down the road 'ell-for-leather, as if ole Nick wus arter 'im, goin' faster and faster till 'e disappeared entire in a cloud o' dust."

"And what did Jos do?" enquired Stephen, as the speaker paused.

"When Jos come to 'is senses, 'e found a lump on 'is 'ead as big as a duck-egg. At first 'e wus minded to go an' tell Sarah wot 'e thought of 'er, but 'e wus a wise cove, wus Jos, an' 'e knowed as a man don't stand no charnce in a argyment wiv a woman. So arter cussin' a bit to 'isself, 'e set orf arter 'is donkey, 'im bein' pretty sure as that 'ere animal wasn't likely to turn back but would keep straight forrard. But 'e didn't catch up wiv 'im till 'e 'ad pegged it near ten miles; an' it's my opinion as 'e wouldn't never 'ave seed that 'ere donkey again if it 'adn't been as the near wheel o' the cart 'it up again' a tree, an' come orf. It's an 'ard world for an honest tradesman is this, sir."

The tinker leaned back in his seat, and, with an air of complacence, emptied his beer mug. He seemed to have completely forgotten the incident which he had been originally asked to describe, and Stephen, noting his friend's

growing impatience, thought it time to remind him of the point at issue.

"Such information as you have imparted, sir, is of undoubted interest," he said, with an air of gravity widely at variance with the mirth in his eyes. "But perhaps you will state precisely what is your quarrel with this gentleman here."

"Oh, 'im!" said the tinker contemptuously. "Well, as I said afore, there wus me a-mending of a pan an' there wus Adam a-eatin' of the 'edge all peaceful an' 'appy, when up comes this 'ere cove lookin' as innercent as a hangel from 'eving, an' sez, pat as you please, 'A fine evenin', me man.' 'Aye, it is an' all,' sez I; 'never see a finer, sir, not for spring,' I sez. 'An' what's that yer doin'?' sez 'e, cockin' 'is glass at me, 'im bein' a bit near-sighted, I reckon. 'I'm a-mendin' of a pan, sir,' sez I. 'A pan?' sez 'e. 'Aye, a pan,' sez I. 'An' what the dooce are you doin' that for?' he arsks. 'The thing ain't worth mendin' by the look of it,' he sez. Now, I took that 'ere remark as bein' personal, 'im a-disparidgin' of me wares when 'e didn't know nothink about 'em. So I ups on me feet, an' looks 'im in the eye fierce an' threatenin', an' I sez, 'By the Lord 'Arry, I'll show ye whether it's worth mendin' or not!' But afore I could say another word he ups wiv 'is cane an' pokes it in me stummick an' gives me a shove, an' down I goes back'ard's through the 'edge into the field be'ind. Then, quicker'n I can tell ye, 'e throws 'is legs acrost pore Adam's back, an' 'e sez, 'You are the most insolent knave as I ever seed an' yer donkey is too fat. So I'm a-goin' to give 'im a bit o' exercise, just to show ye what 'e can do when 'e's 'andled proper, an', 'appen you'll be a bit more perlite next time ye meets me.' Wiv that, 'e catches Adam a wallop wiv 'is stick like as the pore moke never 'ad afore, yells like a 'eathen cannibile, an' away they goes down the 'ill wiv me arter 'em. Me wares is spread all over the road for nigh a quarter of a mile back; it fair broke me 'eart to see 'em

gettin' scattered like that 'ere, sir, swelp me it did! An' what I wants to know is, what call 'ad this 'ere cove to sneak me cart an' Adam? I spoke 'im fair an' proper, I did—though I did get a bit 'ot when 'e disparidged of me pan as I wus mendin'. It were a low trick 'e done if ye arsks me, sir, a low trick on an honest tradesman; never seed a lower——"

But the fit of laughter which Stephen had been manfully controlling would no longer be denied, and peal after peal rang from his lips and resounded through the room. The tinker paused in astonished indignation, and the young exquisite banished his langour in order to voice his disapproval of the undignified manner of the arbitrator.

"Gad, Steve, ya are doocid hilarious!" he said reprovingly. "Methinks ya' sense of humor is unduly keen today, though damme if I can see what there is to laugh at. Expect it's the spring that's affecting ya."

"I find the whole affair mighty amusing, Harry," gasped Stephen, in no way abashed by his friend's remarks.

"Do ya indeed now? Well, I don't," said the other acidly. "How would you like to hear ya' name used as an oath by a dirty little pan-mender?"

"Who're ye callin' a dirty little pan-mender?" cried the tinker excitedly. "Ye're arskin' for it, ye are, me buck, an' if it wasn't for this gent, who 'as app'inted of 'isself to be judge, ye'd get it too, swelp me! *Look* 'ere, sir," he continued, turning an earnest face to Stephen, "this cove's a liar when 'e sez as 'ow I wus a-usin' of 'is name as a cuss-word."

"But I don't see how he could be," objected Stephen quickly, silencing his friend, who was about to take exception to the tinker's epithet, with a wave of his hand. "You admitted it yourself just now."

"I admitted it!" echoed the tinker in amazement. "Well, that's a good 'un, that is! Why, blow me tight if I knows

'is bloomin' name. I ain't never set eyes on 'im afore this arternoon, let alone 'eard 'is tally."

"Which is just as I thought," declared Stephen calmly. "You were ignorant of my friend's name, but you used it none the less, albeit unwittingly. Let me enlighten you. The gentleman who rode your donkey, and to whose qualities as a rider your donkey objected with unqualified success, is Lord Alverford, and his first name chances to be Harry. Hence, when you used the term 'By the Lord Harry' he took it as a personal affront. Have I got it right, Harry?"

"Perfectly right, Steve. Thought he was trying to smoke me, b'jove!"

"So you will see, sir, that my friend had a grievance," said Stephen to the tinker. "But nevertheless I rule that he had no right to make off with your cart in the way he did, and he must reimburse you for the damage done to your pots and pans and for his ride on your donkey. So I give judgment against him for two guineas, to be paid on the instant."

"But, blind me and blister me, Steve! ya haven't heard my version of the matter," objected Lord Alverford, though somewhat half-heartedly. "Ya are a poor judge, 'pon my soul and honor. Not that I object to paying two guineas; 'tis the principle of the thing, what?"

"Principle fiddlesticks!" retorted Stephen rudely. "You had more than two guineas' worth of fun, and 'tis cheap at the price. Are you satisfied with my decree?" he asked of the tinker.

But the tinker was too overcome to make reply. He sat staring wide-eyed and open-mouthed at the young aristocrat, as if the latter were some peculiar and wonderful kind of being hitherto unknown to science, and he kept gulping noisily in a vain endeavor to find speech wherewith to express his feelings. Stephen, noting his difficulty, untied the reluctant tongue by asking him if he would partake of

another tankard of ale, but the honest tradesman could not utter a word beyond "Thank ye kindly, sir," until half the beer had disappeared down his throat. Then he sighed deeply, and said in an awed whisper:

"D'ye mean to tell me—honest now, sir—as that 'ere cove is a reel live lord?"

"I do indeed," replied Stephen gravely.

"Lor' love me boots, who'd ever 'ave thought it?" breathed the tinker. "A real, live lord a-ridin' of my Adam, an' me cussin' 'im black in the face! Swelp me!" The tinker paused to collect his thoughts, but not for an instant did he remove his fascinated gaze from the pleasant, rather bored face of his former enemy. "An' did I 'ear ye aright when ye said as 'e wus a-goin' to pay me a couple o' guineas for them things as got broke when 'e was ridin' down the 'ill?"

"You did."

The tinker gulped, and proceeded, albeit with obvious ruefulness, to justify his description of himself as an honest tradesman. "They weren't never worth anythink like as much as that, sir," he said sadly. "If ye was to say ten bob now, or"—the tinker gulped again—"or even maybe seven an' sixpence, I shouldn't have no cause for grumblin', for, to tell the truth, most o' them utensils"—the tinker spoke the word with conscious pride in his erudition—"ain't really broke in the strick sense o' the word. They're only a bit dinged, as ye might say, an' an hour or two's work'll soon make 'em near as good as new."

"That may be, my friend; but you have forgotten the indignity put upon your donkey. My judgment must stand," declared Stephen, with grave finality.

Without further protest Lord Alverford took out his purse, then pushed three golden coins across the table towards the tinker. "There y'are, my man," he said lazily. "Two guineas for the fine, and one guinea for ya to drown ya' animosity in ale and to pay for an extra feed for Adam.

Ya' donkey is dooced knowing and deserves it, perish me if he don't!"

Slowly a smile began to dawn in the tinker's eyes, and grew until his face literally beamed with satisfaction and pleasure. He picked up the coins and tied each one separately in a knot in a large and not over-clean handkerchief of flaring yellow, which he placed carefully in an inside pocket next his shirt.

"I thanks ye very kindly, gentlemen both," he said, touching his eyebrow with the forefinger of his right hand. "There ain't no malice bore by me for yer ridin' of Adam, yer lordship—lor' love me boots, no, not a hatom! I takes it as a compliment as 'e 'as bin rode by a reel, live lord, an' so will Adam when I tells 'im."

"Now, pink me and perish me! ya, damme, what?" cried his lordship in amazement.

"Why, o course 'e will!" asserted the tinker, equally amazed that such a question should be asked. "Adam un'erstands ev'ry word as I sez to 'im—in fack, 'e's a sight easier to make un'erstand than a lot o' 'umans as I could tell of. An' 'e'll be as proud as Punch when I tells 'im this 'ere. Ye see, yer lordship, them guineas as you've paid me gives me an' Adam a big leg-up as honest tradesmen, they does."

"And how is that, pray?"

"Well, I'll now be able to put a sign on me cart, 'Paternized by the nobility,' I shall," said the tinker triumphantly, "though I reckon as I'll 'ave to prove it wiv me fists to one or two o' them doubtin' Thomases as I meets reg'lar," he added thoughtfully.

The young lord suddenly abandoned his lounging attitude, and sat upright in his chair. "Can ya read, my man?" he asked.

"Aye, that I can; printed books an' ornery writin', too," declared the tinker proudly.

"And what's ya' name?" queried his lordship, pulling the bell rope which hung close by his chair.

"Will'um Noblett, yer lordship, usually called 'Bill the Tinker' for short."

Stephen sat in amused astonishment as his friend ordered the maid who answered his summons to bring pens, ink, and paper, and watched in silence as that usually indolent young man wrote diligently, though somewhat laboriously, a note which was shortly handed to him for his approval, and which ran as follows:

To all whom it may concern.

"Take notice that this is to certify that I have traded with William Noblett—commonly known as 'Bill the Tinker,' and the owner of that very remarkable and sagacious ass Adam—and declare him to be a reliable and honest tradesman.

"ALVERFORD,
"Viscount."

The feelings with which the tinker read this testimonial from his latest customer can better be imagined than described. He sat like one in a dream, his bewildered gaze travelling backwards and forwards from the smiling faces before him to the piece of paper in his hand. At length he bent his head towards Stephen, and said in a whisper:

"Would ye mind, sir, just lammin' me one be'ind the ear —a good 'ard 'un, too?"

"What for?" asked Stephen, surprised by the singular request.

"Just so as I can be sure as I'm awake," replied the tinker. "All this 'ere don't seem nateral no'ow, it don't; it's again' reason for a tinker to 'ave dealin's wiv a reel, live lord, an' I reckon that in a minute or two I shall open me peepers to find as I've fell asleep under the 'edge an' the rain's comin' down 'evings 'ard."

"Oh, I can vouch for your being awake," laughed Stephen. "This is no dream, my friend."

The tinker finished off his ale, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, and rose to his feet in preparation for departure. Once again he read his testimonial through ere he hid it reverently away from the prying eyes of men; then, with an awkward attempt at a bow, he said solemnly:

"This 'ere's a great day for me, yer lordship an' sir. There ain't a tinker from 'ere to Kent as 'as got it wrote out fair an' proper as 'e is paternized by the nobility like what I 'ave—no, an' if ye arsks me there never wus one, neither, not even Lucky Jos 'isself. I thanks ye 'earty, I does, yer lordship, an' you as well, sir, an' I bids ye a very good evenin'," and the gratified tinker took his leave, muttering to himself as he went, "Paternized by the nobility! William Noblett, 'Ardware Dealer, paternized by the nobility an' gentry. Lor' love me boots! who'd ever 'ave thought it?"

CHAPTER III

WHEREIN LORD ALVERFORD UNFOLDS A MADCAP PLOT

"WHAT brings ya to Bolderburn, Steve?" enquired Lord Alverford, as the door closed behind the tinker.

Mr. Burgoyne flushed slightly; but this unwonted display of confusion passed unnoticed by his companion.

"I have been up to Kendal to see my uncle, who is sick, and I am on my way back to London," he replied, with well-assumed carelessness. "My plaguey horse went lame about half a mile away from here, and I was obliged to seek the nearest inn."

"And why, i' gad's name, didn't ya come to me?" asked his lordship, in an offended tone. "Ya had to pass my gates to get here, for the Gables lies scarce ten minutes away to the north. Nay, blister me, Steve! but I take that unkindly of ya, 'pon my soul and honor I do."

"I'm sorry, Harry, but I did not know where I was until I enquired of the smith. Even then I confess that, though the name of the place seemed familiar to me, I clean forgot that 'twas hereabouts you lived. And you scarce can blame me for that; I always associate you with London, and I should never have expected to find you rusticating here in any case."

"No, I suppose not," agreed his lordship thoughtfully. "Damme if we aren't both a bit out of our latitude, as it were, what? But now ya are here, are ya going to stay, or are ya in a hurry to be off?"

The question was unwelcome to Stephen. He had asked

it of himself a dozen times since his arrival without coming to a decision, and it irritated him not a little to find himself unable to make up his mind. This irresolution was foreign to him, and he did not like it, but he felt incapable of making a definite statement at the moment.

"I don't quite know what to do, Harry," he said. "I am loth to leave my horse unreservedly in the hands of that loutish fellow of an ostler, for I am overfond of him, and he is valuable. Yet I know not how I shall pass the time if I stay here; I don't suppose such entertainment as you gave me a while ago is a daily occurrence. Also, I ought to be in town within the week, and altogether 'tis a pestilent situation."

Lord Alverford smiled quizzically. "'Tis a new mood for you, methinks, Steve, this willy-nilly one," he opined. "Ya are usually so dashed sure of ya'self, and ya' mind is made up on the instant. So what do ya say to letting me decide for ya, eh? I can promise ya a pretty little adventure such as ya couldn't hope to get in London, and ya'll enjoy it mightily, I know ya will, b'jove."

"First I must know if your pretty little adventure appeals to me," said Stephen cautiously, knowing the proclivities of his friend and the hare-brained escapades upon which he regularly embarked with joyous enthusiasm.

"Gad! 'twill delight ya, 'pon my soul and——"

He broke off abruptly as the door opened to admit a tall, magnificently proportioned man of about thirty-five, whose dark, handsome face was marred by a cruel and sensual mouth. The newcomer was elegantly, almost foppishly, dressed, and was quite as much out of place in his present surroundings as was Lord Alverford himself. His bold, steel-grey eyes rested at once on Stephen's broad back, and, judging by the frown which promptly gathered between his heavy brows, it was plain that he recognized it, and that he was ill-pleased to see it. But the frown disappeared as rapidly as it had come, and when Stephen turned his head

to see who had invaded their privacy his look of enquiry was met by a polite and innocuous smile.

"Dash me, Randolph, but I had clean forgot ya," cried Alverford, as the newcomer advanced. "Sit in that chair there—but ya had better dust it first, for 'twas lately occupied by a tinker, and he was a thought travel-stained, b'jove! Steve, ya know Sir Randolph Gorst, methinks, eh?"

"Sir Randolph and I have met before," returned Stephen, with a somewhat distant inclination of his head in the baronet's direction.

"Of course we have," responded Sir Randolph with well-feigned warmth, as he seated himself. "Everybody who is anybody in London knows Buck Burgoyne."

A shadow of annoyance swept across Stephen's face. "I am not enamored of the nickname, sir, and would fain forget it," he said quietly. "My friends are charitable enough to remember my distaste for it."

"Ah, you must forgive me, Mr. Burgoyne; I had no idea that it misliked you," said Sir Randolph easily, but reddening under the rebuke. "For myself, I should be proud of the title, standing, as it does, for all that is most venerated in the world of fashion and sport. 'Twas your popularity that gave it to you; and I, for one, find popularity a sweet and toothsome diet."

"Tastes differ, Sir Randolph. Popularity is a fruit which is sometimes delicious, but its seed is strangely unreliable. In some it breeds hatred, in many it breeds malice, and in most it breeds envy; and I do not find that the fruit itself compensates for its offspring."

"Yet it would surely not please you to see your popularity wane, Mr. Burgoyne."

"I' faith, 'twould cause me no regret if it disappeared entirely, sir. Its departure would at least enable me to discover which are my true friends and which but sycophantic parasites, and at the same time I should be relieved

of the burden of the many onerous duties which fall to the lot of the popular idol but which give him no pleasure."

"You speak bitterly, Mr. Burgoyne. And yet you must, in the first instance, have sought popularity, otherwise you could scarce occupy the position in the social firmament which you now adorn," said Sir Randolph Gorst, with a scarcely perceptible sneer.

"I admit it," returned Stephen, ignoring the veiled taunt. "I was young when I first found myself in London, and I was dazzled by its pomp and glitter. It seemed to me that no man could have a nobler ambition than to attain to the heights to which Brummel had attained, and from that day forward I set myself to scale those heights. Well, my endeavors met with moderate success, and my ambition was realized long ago, but meseems the prize was not worth the winning. However, my views can scarce interest you, Sir Randolph."

"On the contrary, they interest me mightily. London would be vastly surprised to hear such words from its Mr. Burgoyne, and I vow 'twill never credit me when I retail them."

"There is little purpose in your retailing them, sir," said Stephen coldly.

"Ah! Then am I to take it that they are not sincere?" There was offence in Sir Randolph's tone, and his lip curled in a manner which caused Lord Alverford some alarm and not a little wonderment.

"Insincerity is not one of my many failings, Sir Randolph," returned Stephen haughtily. "I am in the habit of saying what I mean and meaning what I say."

"Now, singe me and scorch me! surely you two are not going to quarrel about nothing," interposed Harry pettishly. "Ya don't understand Steve, Randolph, and ya are always plaguey tactless, b'jove, ya are indeed! For goodness' sake change the subject, before ya get to blows. Nay, 'pon

my soul and honor, I'll change it for ya. Are ya going to join me in that little project I told ya about, Steve?"

"But you didn't tell me about it, Harry," returned Stephen, his cold expression dissolving in a smile.

"Didn't I, b'jove? Then I'll tell ya now. Randolph knows all about it; he's in it, too. D'ya know Colonel Oldfield?"

"Never heard of him."

"Well, ya know Lady Averill Stapleton then?"

"I don't."

"What! D'ya mean to say that ya don't know Lady Averill, the most adorable, delightful, perverse creature that ever drove man to distraction? Gad, Steve, ya haven't lived, 'pon my soul and honor ya haven't!"

"You are enthusiastic, Harry," said Stephen, smiling. "But you will doubtless remember that you have told me exactly the same thing of at least a dozen other women. You were ever susceptible, particularly to the immature, schoolgirl type of beauty."

"Schoolgirl! Immature!" ejaculated Lord Alverford indignantly. "Nay, damme, Steve, ya're wrong this time, b'jove! Lady Averill is twenty-five, and she has the shape of a goddess and the face of a—of a—oh, perish me, Randolph, tell him what she is like; ya' tongue is cleverer than mine."

"She is certainly a remarkably handsome woman," said Sir Randolph, with a gleam in his steel-grey eyes that made Stephen long to strike him. "She is ripe as an autumn plum just ready to fall, and desirable as nectar to a thirsty man. 'Twill be a lucky man who wins her, for though she is as yet virginal as the snows, there is in her a font of love and loveliness that will never cease to flow for him who awakes her heart, and which will thrill and delight him to the exclusion of all other passions for many a long day."

"There, Steve; are ya satisfied now?" cried his lordship.

"I am satisfied that the Lady Averill's charms are of a kind

that make a strong appeal to Sir Randolph Gorst," replied Stephen drily. "'Tis strange that I have never met her, or at least heard of her, if she be as beautiful as you say, Harry."

"Not so strange as you might suppose, Mr. Burgoyne," said Sir Randolph, before Lord Alverford could reply. "Lady Averill chances to dislike London, and never visits it unless she is compelled. Even then, she makes her stay as short as she can and attends but few social functions. She professes a profound contempt for the town's beaux, and says she cannot believe that those simpering, posturing popinjays—her words, sir, not mine—are real men."

"And yet I find two of those same beaux, those posturing popinjays—her words, sir, not mine—apparently dancing attendance upon her in a remote and desolate spot miles from anywhere," commented Stephen blandly.

"Now, dig me and drive me! he has us there, Randolph; he has, 'pon my word," said Lord Alverford, as Sir Randolph turned his head to hide his annoyance. "I admit it, Steve; Lady Averill is the ravishing reason why I am living at the Gables. Ya see, 'tis like this. Ever since my father died my mother has been impressing upon me at least a dozen times a day that 'tis high time I married and settled down, what? Of course, I didn't take that seriously, being quite happy as I am; but she is a doocid persistent woman, my mother, and a few weeks ago I had a cursed preemptory letter from her telling me to proceed at once to Bolderburn to stay with her. 'Twas confounded inconvenient for me to leave town just then, for I had promised to race my four-in-hand to Brighton against Dandy Dick Venning for five hundred a side on the following Monday, but—well, ya know my mother, Steve, and ya will understand why I came north without delay, what?"

"I think I do, Harry," smiled Stephen.

"Hum! I thought ya would. When I reached the Gables she said never a word as to why she had sent for me; but she was confounded gracious, and I knew there

was trouble brewing. And the very next morning at breakfast—at breakfast, mark ya, at half past eight in the morning, b'jove, at least four hours earlier than usual for me, damme—she let go her broadside. 'Alverford, my son,' she said solemnly—she can be most cursed solemn, ya know—'Alverford, ya are going to be married.' 'Twas so doocid sudden that a piece of toast that I was eating went down the wrong way, and nearly choked me. 'Madam, methinks someone has been bubbling ya,' said I, when I had rid myself of that pestilent toast. 'Bubbling me!' she drawls, raising her eyebrows and looking at me with that infernal stare of hers that makes ya feel like an obnoxious puppy. 'Bubbling me!' she says again. 'And pray what may that mean?' A staggerer that, ya'll admit, what? 'It means—well, it means smoking ya, as it were,' says I, after some little thought. 'Does it indeed?' she returns, dooced sarcastic. 'Doubtless ya' explanation would be illuminating to a man of intellect, but unfortunately my poor woman's brain is so dull that I am still in the dark. Smoking and bubbling convey naught to me. I must crave your filian patience and ask for further enlightenment.' Well, ya know, I was floored—I was, 'pon my soul and honor—and I had to think confounded hard for a while. But at last I had it. 'What I mean to say, mother, is that you have been misinformed,' says I, rising and bowing in my best manner. 'Ah! Now I understand,' she says sweetly, smiling like she smiles at her dearest enemy. 'Ya should really try to get into the habit of speaking English, Harry; 'twould save ya much verbiage.' "

Lord Alverford paused, and reflectively rubbed his handsome nose. "What d'ya think of that, now, Steve?" he asked.

"Methinks she had the better of it up to there," laughed Stephen. "But what happened next?"

"My lady mother was silent for awhile; then she said, 'Ya are laboring under a misapprehension, Henry. No-

body informed me that you are about to marry. I decided that for myself.' She stopped to let her words sink in; but seeing that I was incapable of speech, she went on again: 'I sent for ya to come here for a purpose that may or may not commend itself to ya, but which is nevertheless unalterably fixed in my mind. I have long urged ya to find for ya'self a wife; but as ya have persistently disregarded my wishes, and because I fear that ya will more likely than not become the prey of one of those painted town minxes, I have gone to the trouble of finding one for ya.' Ya could have knocked me down with a feather, b'jove, and I could only sit there and stare at her like a cursed stone image. 'I do not expect any thanks from you for what I have done, Henry,' she goes on, in her most syrupy tones, and with that same smile. 'Ya will doubtless rebel, and find a thousand objections to the girl I have chosen. However, I would counsel ya to save ya' breath, for my mind is made up, and I will brook no opposition. Do I make myself perfectly clear, Henry?' I gasped like a cursed trout on a river-bank, and said, hoarse as a jay: 'Ya do, madam; 'pon my word, ya do—in fact, dooce take me, too clear, b'gad! And as ya have gone to so much trouble on my account, perhaps ya wouldn't mind going to a bit more and telling me who the unfortunate woman is, what?' 'Not at all, Henry,' she says. 'The girl I have chosen is in every way fitted to become your viscountess. She is well born, beautiful, and clever; and though she is far from wealthy, one cannot have everything, and ya have already more money than ya can possibly need. Also—and I rate this high—she is unspoiled by town life, and has never been in London for more than a month at a time.' I groaned audibly, for I pictured myself tied for life to some giggling country miss whose conversation would be made up of 'La's' and 'Oh's,' and would go off into hysterics if she glimpsed a petticoat on a clothes' line. However, I pulled myself together sufficiently to say, 'Quite so, madam. She

is doubtless a paragon of virtue, but ya omit to say *who* she is.' Then very slowly, in her most pestilent drawl, she announces, 'She is Lady Averill Stapleton.' "

"Which information would doubtless ease your mind," ventured Stephen.

"Ease my mind? Hum! Perhaps. I'm not so sure," returned Lord Alverford dubiously. "Ya see, I hadn't seen Averill since she was about sixteen, and she was then a madcap young person, very leggy like a young colt, and with cursed imperious ways. But when my mother showed me her portrait I admit I was relieved, for she certainly seemed a most personable young woman—although there was something in her eyes and the set of her chin that made me think she would be plaguey capricious in double harness. 'I take it that the idea meets with Averill's approval,' said I gloomily, more for something to say than aught else. 'That is for you to ascertain,' returned my mother calmly. 'What! Ya haven't asked her?' I cried, confounded dismayed. 'Most certainly not,' she replied, eyeing me as though she thought me a lunatic. 'I have found ya a bride, and surely, Henry, ya do not expect me to do your lovemaking for ya as well?' 'But suppose she refuses me,' I objected. 'Refuse ya she certainly will if she be the girl I take her for,' returned my mother, with the utmost complacence. I was out of my depth, Steve—women are beyond me—but methought this sounded hopeful. 'Well, that will settle it,' I said brightly. But I had made a miscalculation somewhere, b'jove, for she snapped at me like a terrier, curse me if she didn't. 'Settle it, ya ninny,' she cried. 'Of course it won't settle it. Don't ya know that no woman worth the name takes a man at the first time of asking? Ya will continue to ask her in season and out of season until she changes her mind.' 'But meseems that may take me weeks and weeks,' I pleaded. 'Doubtless it will take ya at least six months, but if it takes ya six years here ya have got to remain until ya have accomplished it,' she

said, in a manner that brooked no argument. And here I have been for over five weeks running after Averill like a demented mongrel, b'jove, and I am not a whit nearer than I was when I started, damme if I am, what?"

He concluded his narrative with a heavy sigh, and began abstractedly to fill a long clay pipe which he had taken from the mantlepiece. His task accomplished, he sat gloomy and distrait in the fading twilight, looking not at all like the eager lover whose mistress was 'the most adorable, delightful, perverse creature that ever drove man to distraction.' Indeed, so dismal was his expression that Stephen thought fit to rally him on it.

"Tell me, Harry, are you in love with the Lady Averill?" he asked.

His lordship looked up sharply, and then frowned. "In love with her!" he repeated. "Well—er—now—perish me —why, of course I'm in love with her, damme! 'Twas a foolish question to ask, Steve; 'pon my soul and honor it was," he concluded irritably.

"I was only seeking information," returned Stephen imperturbably. "But as the subject mislikes you, let us talk of other things. Suppose you outline the project you spoke of just now."

"Why, of course; it had quite slipped my memory," said Alverford, his face brightening a little. "Though damme if that doesn't also concern Averill. But no matter. First ya must know that Lady Averill lives not far from here with a fire-eating old curmudgeon of an uncle of hers—Colonel Oldfield, to wit. He was her legal guardian until she came of age, and still behaves as if he owns her, body and soul. He is most infernal rude to every man who looks at her; and as for myself—well, only four days ago he threatened to shoot me if I ever again set foot within his gates. Now, ya must admit that it makes it doocid awkward for me. On one side I have my mother sour as vinegar and curt as the devil because I don't pay sufficient court

to Averill, and on the other the Colonel vowing to destroy me if I dare to approach her. A pretty pickle, 'pon my soul and honor, what?"

"Aye, 'tis a difficult situation," agreed Stephen gravely, but with twinkling eyes. "And how do you propose to remedy it?"

"I am minded to teach the Colonel a lesson. He had the impudence to call me a pestilent peacock, a bloodless nincompoop, and a dozen other things equally offensive, b'gad; and when I told him he should swallow his words, he said that hard-bitten old soldiers did not fight with callow youths. Now, I put it to ya, Steve, could any grown man of twenty-seven allow such an insult to pass unavenged, eh?"

" 'Twas strong language to overlook, certainly. I should like to meet your Colonel, Harry; he sounds interesting."

"If rudeness and boorishness be interesting, then he is interesting indeed," retorted the other indignantly. "However, he shall pay for it ere he is much older; he will sing mighty small when I have finished with him, b'jove! Tomorrow morning he intends to set out in his lumbering old coach, accompanied by Lady Averill, to visit an old friend of his who lives many miles from here. He has made this same journey two or three times since I came here, and although he invariably returns the same day, 'tis usually long past midnight when he gets back home. So I have thought of a plan whereby I can kill two birds with one stone. Not far from the Colonel's house is a cross-roads which he must pass on his homeward journey, and I intend to waylay his coach at that place. With your assistance, and that of Randolph here, I shall hold him up in approved highwayman style, b'jove, order Averill to descend, and then force the Colonel to continue his journey without her. What d'ya say to that, eh?"

"Do you mean to say that you are going to abduct the Lady Averill?" cried Stephen incredulously.

"Precisely," replied his lordship, with a satisfied air.

"But 'tis madness!" protested Stephen. "What do you propose to do with her when you have got her?"

"Well, now, if she chances to be agreeable—as maybe she will, for women are plaguey romantic, ya know—I shall ride with her hot-foot for Gretna, b'jove! If she objects to that—and mark ya, she might; ya can never tell what the divine creatures will do—why, then, I shall just take her to the Gables, b'gad, put her in charge of my mother, and keep her there until the next morning. Ya see, Steve, whichever it is, I shall have worsted that cursed Colonel, and 'twill have been a pretty and exciting venture into the bargain."

"That it will; too exciting for me, I fear," said Stephen drily. "'Tis the most fantastic and preposterous scheme I ever had presented to me, and I, for one, have no desire to find myself languishing in gaol. Abduction is a serious offence against the law, Harry; perhaps you did not think of that."

"Of course I thought of it; d'ya imagine me a fool?" demanded Lord Alverford petulantly. "But the law or its minions will not be apprised. Nobody knows aught of the matter except us three, and whether we succeed or fail there is no risk of our being recognized, for we shall be cloaked and masked. Damme, Steve! ya are getting confounded cautious, 'pon my soul and honor ya are."

"Maybe I am cautious, but meseems there is more in this than appears on the surface," replied Stephen seriously. "From what you tell me, this Colonel Oldfield is scarce the type of man to surrender his niece without protest, and it appears to me that somebody may know the feel of a bullet inside him ere the finish of the escapade. In which event matters might prove awkward for the wounded man if, as might well be, he were perforce left on the field of battle. In that case I am sure that the Colonel would not hesitate to hand him over to the authorities; and 'twould go hard

with him, no matter who he chanced to be. No, Harry; I am not enamored of your scheme."

All this time Sir Randolph Gorst had sat silent, with a look of intense boredom on his face. He had yawned widely and openly during Lord Alverford's story of his courtship, his only sign of interest in the conversation being an occasional sneer—faint, but perceptible to Stephen —which had passed unobserved by the young nobleman. Now, however, he raised his eyes to Stephen's face and said indulgently:

"Come, come, Mr. Burgoyne, 'tis a monstrous gloomy view you take. Naturally, you are inclined to see danger in this, but I can assure you that there is no risk. If there were, I should not have countenanced Harry's proposal."

"Then why do you need my assistance?" queried Stephen sharply. "I should have thought two of you were enough for a task you regard so lightly."

"Ah, now you jump to the other extreme," said Sir Randolph easily, with a little smile. "If there were but two of us, the Colonel might think it worth while to resist, but odds of three to one would convince him of the truth of the adage that discretion is the better part of valor."

Stephen made no reply. He sat back in his chair, and drummed noiselessly on the table with his fingers. His face betrayed nothing beyond a casual interest in the matter under discussion, but actually he was thinking deeply and rapidly. For an idea had occurred to him which put a different complexion on his friend's madcap proposal—an idea which was disturbing and which filled him with dismay. Was it possible that the Lady Averill Stapleton was the girl who had that very day bewitched him, and whose beauty had compelled him, against his better judgment, to hark back on his tracks? The somewhat vague description which his companions had given certainly fitted the fair horsewoman like a glove; and the more he thought on it the more improbable it seemed that there were two women

in the neighborhood to whom Gorst's eulogy might apply.

His conclusion caused him to shudder inwardly. All along he had wondered at Sir Randolph Gorst's presence in a tiny village so far removed from his usual haunts, for the baronet was well known to him, and Stephen was aware that the friendship which seemingly existed between him and Lord Alverford was of such very recent growth as to preclude all possibility of its being the reason for his absenting himself from London. But now it appeared clear as the landscape on a bright June noonday. Sir Randolph Gorst was here for precisely the same reason as Alverford—to pay court to the beautiful Lady Averill. And, knowing Sir Randolph's reputation, and having seen that peculiar gleam in his eyes when he spoke of her, Stephen shuddered, as well he might.

Gorst was notorious in town, but his notoriety was of a distinctly unsavory kind. He was justly reputed to be enormously wealthy, and he aped the manners and dress of the Corinthian, whilst his prodigality gave him a certain popularity with those who hung about the fringe of the Polite World. But, despite years of endeavor, he had not succeeded in gaining more than a very precarious footing in society; and for this his uncontrolled and insatiable passions were in a very great measure to blame. He was a libertine of the most unscrupulous order, and his amorous adventures had ranged from a kitchen wench to a foreign countess. A dead shot and absolutely fearless, he pursued each new object of his desire with a relentlessness and persistence that defied opposition and disregarded every law of decency and honor; and more than one outraged husband lay mouldering in the grave for his temerity in attempting to avenge a frail, disillusioned wife who had succumbed to the baronet's pitiless wooing. For Sir Randolph abandoned his mistresses with no more scruple than he sought them; and London, heartless as it was in the main, could not bring itself to receive into its inner circle

one whose callous brutality to the unfortunate women who had loved him was a byword.

And this was the man who was casting covetous eyes in the direction of Lady Averill Stapleton! Surely Alverford was mad to give such a one the *cachet* of his friendship, or to enlist his aid in the escapade that was toward. The latter savored of seeking help from a fox to catch a chicken, and said little for Harry's discretion. But why was Sir Randolph so ready to fall in with his lordship's absurd plan, and, further, why did his anxiety for its success drive him to the extreme course of trying to procure the services of a third party in the enterprise? He had arrived at no plausible explanation of these problems when Alverford's gentle voice broke in upon his musings.

"Damme, Steve! don't ya think ya have pondered long enough, what?" he said, taking out his watch. "It grows late, and I must be off. What d'ya say, now? Will ya join us or won't ya?"

Stephen shook his head slowly. "I am sorry, Harry, but I fail to see the humor of it," he said. "What fun can there be in causing an old man much anxiety, or in frightening a pretty woman well-nigh to death? An I am any judge, 'twill not further your cause with the Lady Averill, for I cannot conceive that any woman of spirit will be pleased with such cavalier treatment. No, Harry; if you will be advised by me, you will abandon the idea, and that at once."

"Now, perish me——" began his lordship in aggrieved tones; but Sir Randolph interrupted him.

"Come, Harry, say no more about it," he said, rising to his feet. "Cannot you see that Mr. Burgoyne does not intend to have anything to do with the affair? 'Tis doubtless the thought of that bullet he mentioned that obsesses his mind, and deters him from what I consider will prove a very pleasant diversion."

Stephen also rose, and looked Sir Randolph full in the eye. "Do you insinuate that I am afraid, sir?" he enquired,

in a cool drawl which Alverford knew to be the herald of his most dangerous mood.

"Nay, nay, Mr. Burgoyne; 'tis an ugly word," protested Sir Randolph, with an enigmatical smile. "I prefer to put it that you are—discreet. Good day to you, sir."

"One moment ere you depart, Sir Randolph. Permit me to ask a question. Why are you so eager for the success of Harry's enterprise?"

Sir Randolph flushed darkly, and anger blazed in his eyes. But his voice was calm and deliberate as he answered:

"Methought 'twas obvious. I find myself compelled to remain for an indefinite period in this neighborhood, pending the completion of a business matter connected with a small estate near Mansfield which I own. I have already been here close upon a fortnight, and I am most infernally bored. Hence I welcome anything that promises a little excitement, even such a paltry diversion as this which Harry proposes."

"Nay, curse me, Randolph, 'twas you who first proposed the scheme, not I," protested Lord Alverford. "I would not rob ya of the honor of being its author; such a brilliant idea would never have occurred to me in a thousand years, damme if it would."

Alverford's confession was as disconcerting to Gorst as it was illuminating to Stephen. The baronet was unable to hide his chagrin; but Stephen's face gave no sign that he observed anything significant in his friend's remarks. He appeared to be considering Sir Randolph's explanation, and at length he spoke as if it had entirely satisfied him.

"I understand, Sir Randolph," he said pleasantly. "I fear I had overlooked the ennui that is born of enforced residence in the country, and methinks I also am like to suffer from it ere long, for I must perforce stay here awhile. So perhaps 'twould advantage us all if I joined in your frolic. After all, I am loth to spoil sport, and perhaps,

as you opined, I am inclined to exaggerate the risk. You may count me in, Harry."

"Gad, Steve! but that's handsome of ya, 'pon my soul it is," cried his lordship, beaming delightedly. "Ya'll enjoy it, I vow ya will. Ya had better come over to the Gables now, and stay with me; my mother is cursed fond of ya—in fact, ya are the only one of my friends of whom she approves, and she will be delighted to see ya. Ya can have ya's things sent over, and we can discuss the details of tomorrow night in peace and comfort. What d'ya say, eh?"

"I am afraid I shall have to refuse, Harry," smiled Stephen, shaking his head. "You forget that I am a traveller, and, apart from a few things in my saddlebags, I haven't a rag to my name except the clothes I stand up in. What would Lady Alverford say if I appeared at dinner in buckskins and riding-boots?"

"She would excuse ya; I'm sure she would."

"No, Harry, I think I had better remain where I am—at all events for the present. You and Sir Randolph can arrange matters, and tell me your plans tomorrow. In the meantime, I should be glad if you could loan me a decent mount. I shall need a horse for the venture, and should like to try his paces beforehand."

"I'll have one sent over first thing in the morning, Steve, and Randolph and I will call on ya about noon. Are ya ready, Randolph?"

"Ready and waiting, Harry. I congratulate you on your decision to join us, Mr. Burgoyne, and I trust you will have no cause to regret it," said Sir Randolph blandly.

After the two gentlemen had taken their departure, Stephen called for lights and a bottle of wine. He filled and lighted a pipe, and for a long time he sat smoking and staring thoughtfully into the fire which had recently been lighted against the chill of the spring night. He had much to occupy his mind; but at last the cloud disappeared from his brow, and he smiled.

"I think I see through you, Sir Randolph Gorst," he said aloud, addressing his remarks to the face of an old grandfather clock which looked solemnly down upon him from a corner by the chimney breast. "Yes, I see through you, but my eyes were tardy in opening. 'Tis a clever game you play, I vow, and I am not surprised that Harry fails to understand that he is to pull the chestnuts out of the fire, not for himself, but for you. 'Tis you who will ride to Gretna with the Lady Averill, not Harry. And you will take her there whether she will or no, for you have no scruples in your dealings with women, be they good or bad. I greatly fear that you are a villain, Sir Randolph Gorst, but I think you made a false move when you pressed me into your service."

And the benevolent old clock ticked out a reply which seemed to say:

"Did he? Did he? Who knows? Watch him. Watch him."

CHAPTER IV

SHOWS HOW EASILY COMEDY CAN DEVELOP INTO TRAGEDY

TWO mounted men sat, cloaked and masked, on their motionless steeds in the deep gloom cast by a thicket which bordered the highroad. Although the trees were not yet in full leaf, so dark was the night that at five yards distance the horsemen were invisible; and apart from the occasional ring of steel caused by one of the horses champing its bit, there was nothing whatever to betray their sinister presence to the most vigilant of wayfarers.

It was past midnight, and not a star was to be seen. The clouds hung low, with the promise of rain, and the sickle moon, which had yesternight shone clear from a pale sky, had long since sunk to rest without having once shown her young loveliness to the sleeping countryside. Not a breath of wind stirred the branches of the trees; a silence which could be felt brooded over everything, and intensified the awe-inspiring influence of the darkness.

"Gad, Steve! 'tis a plaguey black night," said one of the horsemen, instinctively lowering the natural pitch of his voice.

"It is indeed, Harry," agreed the other. "But 'tis so much the better for our purpose; there is less chance of our being recognized, and I, for one, am grateful for it."

"What time d'ya make it?" asked Alverford presently.

"I should say 'tis close upon half past twelve," returned Stephen.

"Hum! I wonder what makes Randolph so late. He promised to be here by twelve o'clock, and——"

But even as he spoke the muffled sound of rapidly approaching hoofs fell upon his ears, and he paused, listening intently. The sound grew louder, and in a minute or two a third horseman pulled up abreast of the trysting-place and peered intently into the heavy shadows.

"Hi, there!" he called softly.

"Is that you, Sir Randolph?" asked Stephen, in a low voice.

"Aye," came back the answer, in tones which struck Stephen as being pleasanter than those Sir Randolph was wont to use. "I apologize for my tardy arrival, gentlemen," continued the newcomer, wheeling his horse alongside Alverford's. "I took the wrong turning in the darkness, and nearly failed you in consequence. However, I am in time, so what matter?"

"It matters a lot, Randolph," said Alverford sharply. "'Twas cursed careless of ya to get lost, 'pon my soul and honor it was. I should have thought ya could have found ya' way here blindfold."

"So should I," agreed the other, with a light laugh. "But country roads have a habit of playing one sorry tricks on nights like this, and I was thinking more of the venture than of the way that led to it."

His lordship grunted, and relapsed into silence. He was annoyed with Gorst, whose unpunctuality had caused him much uneasiness, and whose explanation of its cause had quite failed to satisfy him. His zest in the venture upon which he had so eagerly embarked had been slowly evaporating ever since yesterday, when Stephen had exposed its weakness; and the oppressive blackness of the night, favorable as it was to his enterprise, had adversely affected his spirits. Had it not been for the presence of Stephen Burgoyne, he would long ago have turned his horse's head in the direction of home, but his pride forbade him to confess to his friend that he was no longer enamored of the task which he had set himself.

For some moments the silence remained unbroken. Each of the three men sat in tense expectancy, straining his ears to catch the first sound that might herald the approach of Colonel Oldfield's carriage. But all was still as death; it almost seemed that Nature held her breath beneath the menace of Tragedy.

Then suddenly, sharp and clear as a pistol crack, a twig snapped in the coppice behind them. Alverford started as though he had been stung, and spurred forward several paces before he turned and halted. Sir Randolph's horse pivoted on its hind legs like an automaton, and then stood motionless, with its nose thrust forward towards the trees. Only Stephen remained unmoved. He gave no sign that he had noticed anything unusual, but his nerves were tingling, and his every sense seemed more acute than it had ever been before. The change in the relative position of his companions made it possible for him to make out Sir Randolph's faint outline, and he was surprised to note that the baronet held in his right hand a heavy horse-pistol. In addition to this, he was leaning forward in his saddle and gazing intently into the deep undergrowth in a fruitless endeavor to pierce the gloom, and so businesslike was his attitude that Stephen instinctively formed a new and more flattering estimate of the man whom he had hitherto despised.

The lingering seconds passed into minutes; but nothing further disturbed the stillness of the coppice, and at length Sir Randolph turned to Stephen and whispered:

"You heard, Mr. Burgoyne?"

"Aye, I heard," returned Stephen, also in a whisper. "Methought a dry stick broke close at hand."

"And the cause?"

"Nay, I know not the cause, Sir Randolph. But we have heard naught more, and I fancy we have magnified a perfectly natural occurrence into something supernatural."

Sir Randolph shook his head slowly, and, although he could not see his face, Stephen fancied that he smiled.

"Certainly there was nothing supernatural about it," he said. "But sticks don't usually break of their own accord, however dry they may be, and I should be easier in my mind if I felt certain that the wood harbors no stranger."

"Think ya not that the twig was snapped by the movement of some wild thing like a rat or a rabbit?" asked Alverford, who had again drawn close to his friends.

"No. I opine 'twas a booted foot, stealthily but unfortunately placed, that did the damage, and I think 'twere best if I made search to see if I can find the owner of the foot," returned Gorst, preparing to dismount.

"Don't be a fool, Randolph," urged his lordship irritably. "We have no light, and what the devil could ya hope to find in this murk? If there be anyone there, he would see ya long before ya could hope to see him, and 'tis precious little chance ya would have of laying ya' hand on him."

"Harry is right," commented Stephen. "'Twould be folly to enter the wood under such conditions, as well as purposeless, for if someone be in hiding there you may be sure he is up to no good."

"Folly or no, I propose to make the search," declared Sir Randolph resolutely. "I have no mind to be caught between two fires, as we might well be if——"

He broke off abruptly, arrested by another sound. Faint upon the night air came the rumble of wheels and the clatter of hoofs to announce the approach of a heavy vehicle, and in the minds of the waiting men there was no doubt that here at last was Colonel Oldfield's carriage.

"Here they come!" ejaculated Alverford, in a voice quivering with excitement.

"Aye, 'tis they, methinks," said Sir Randolph. "Well, whoever lurks in the wood must bide there; we have no time to search. We must leave that to chance, though I confess it

mislikes me to take such a risk. To your stations, gentlemen."

Stephen took up his previously appointed position with a faint wonder at the manner in which Sir Randolph took it upon himself to issue orders. Singularly enough, it never occurred to Stephen to question his right to command, for the baronet's demeanor ever since he had joined them had been that of the born leader of men, and showed plainly that he was at his best when danger was toward. Stephen felt that he would have no hesitation in following such a man wherever he might lead and he noted that Harry also obeyed promptly and without demur.

At Sir Randolph's suggestion it had been agreed between the conspirators that Stephen should act as spokesman for the party. He was unknown to both Colonel Oldfield and his niece, and consequently unlikely to be recognized, whereas it was thought that, notwithstanding their disguise, it was possible that if either Alverford or Gorst essayed the rôle his voice might betray him to the keen-witted old soldier. Stephen, whilst not enamored of his part, had admitted the force of the argument, and had, albeit with reluctance, consented to the arrangement.

Thus he now placed himself some half dozen yards nearer to the approaching vehicle than were his companions, who remained side by side in readiness to overawe the Colonel with a show of overwhelming odds immediately the coach came to a standstill. As to whether they actually would overawe him Stephen had grave misgivings, but since yesterday, when he consented to become a party to the scheme, he had voiced no further protest.

And now he waited, pistol in hand, listening to the rumble of the approaching carriage. The weapon he held was heavy and formidable, but, in his wisdom, he had neglected to load it. He did not propose to shoot, no matter what happened; 'twas a frolic they were engaged in—a foolish frolic certainly, but a frolic nevertheless—and he had no

desire to spill the blood of a hardy old gentleman whom he had never met, but for whom he somehow felt a considerable admiration.

Two pin-points of light suddenly appeared in the blackness far down the straight road. Judging by the rapidity with which they increased in size, the Colonel's coachman was, despite the gloom, driving at a good round pace, and was evidently in a hurry to reach his journey's end and his bed. His horses were apparently coming along at full gallop, and Stephen had but little time to wait before taking action.

He wheeled his horse into the middle of the road when the vehicle was about twenty yards away, and, standing in his stirrups and pointing his pistol at the dim figure of the coachman, he shouted at the top of his voice:

"Halt! Halt, I say!"

It seemed to Stephen that the driver's action in checking his horses was not quite as prompt as it might have been, and he was obliged to pull his mount sharply to one side to avoid being run down. The result was that when the coach finally came to a standstill he was directly opposite the off-side door. And he was further disconcerted by the fact that one of the occupants of the carriage thought fit to drop the window farthest from where he stood, for he heard the rattle of glass in its frame and a thud which told of a none-too-gentle hand manipulating the strap.

"What in thunder are you stopping for, Sergeant?" roared a stentorian voice, in angry tones.

"Highwaymen, sir," came back laconically from the driver.

"Highwaymen be damned," rasped the Colonel. "Whip up your horses and ride 'em down, you fool."

"Can't be done, sir," replied the driver calmly. "Too many of 'em, sir."

"How many?"

"Three, sir. A businesslike-looking lot, too."

By this time Stephen had ridden quietly round to the

other window, from which the portly figure of the Colonel was protruding. The latter held a pistol in his right hand, and was trying his best to get a sight of the miscreants who barred his way. It was obviously his intention to open fire without parley, and it was fortunate for Stephen that the old soldier was too preoccupied to observe his approach, else he had assuredly been shot.

It was certainly not the moment for ceremony, and, quick as thought, Stephen's hand darted out and seized the old gentleman's wrist in such a manner that the pistol fell harmlessly to the ground.

The Colonel swore luridly, and turned a red and angry face towards his assailant.

"Damn you, you villian!" he cried, in a voice in which chagrin was the dominant note. "You've bested me nicely, by Jupiter! but your triumph shall be short-lived. What d'ye want?"

"I ask your pardon for my importunity, Colonel Oldfield," replied Stephen courteously. "My action was, mayhap, a trifle rough, but, as a soldier, you will agree that it was necessary."

"For the love of heaven, cut out all that nonsense, and get on with your trade," cried the Colonel irritably. "D'ye think I want to listen to polite speeches from a dastardly thief, a marauding pest, at one o'clock in the morning? What is't you want, you filthy scum? Money, I suppose!"

"Your supposition is wide of the mark, sir," returned Stephen imperturbably. "The Lady Averill Stapleton travels with you, I think."

"And what if she does? What the devil has that got to do with you?" snapped the hardy old soldier. "Are you after her jewels, as well as my purse, damn your eyes?"

"I want neither the one nor the other, sir. I want the Lady Averill herself."

The Colonel gasped, and for a moment Stephen feared that apoplexy would claim him as a victim. Even in the

dim light shed by the carriage lamps Stephen could see him grow purple in the face and roll his eyes until they appeared to be nothing but whites. He fought for speech like a drowning man fighting for breath, but no sound came from his lips except a low growl.

At last, with an unexpectedness that made Stephen's horse retreat a pace, he thrust open the carriage door and sprang to the ground; then, slamming the door behind him, he placed his broad back firmly against it, and somewhat dramatically folded his arms across his chest.

"So you want Averill, do you, you dastard?" he breathed, scarce above a whisper. "You want Averill? Well, you'll never get her as long as my hand can raise a finger. You'll have to murder me first—though probably as you practice abduction you won't stick at murder." Then, abruptly raising his voice, he shouted: "Sergeant, 'tis Lady Averill they want. Get your blunderbuss, and blow this scoundrel's head off at once. Quick!"

"Sorry, sir. Should be more than happy to oblige, sir, but it can't be done," responded the driver regretfully. "There's two desprit-looking coves here pointing their pistols at my stomach, and they ain't far enough away for there to be any chance of 'em missing me."

"You're a damned coward, Sergeant Ball, and I discharge you from my employ here and now," shouted the Colonel. "D'ye hear? You're drummed out, sir, dismissed the servi——"

"Now, uncle dear, calm yourself, I pray," interposed a quiet, softly-modulated voice which Stephen thought was the sweetest he had ever heard. "I warrant Sergeant Ball would help you an he could, and you know it. Did I understand this ferocious person, who looks as if he had stepped out of a Drury Lane melodrama, to say that he wants me?"

"That was what the impudent rascal said, Averill, but he won't get you," replied the Colonel, in much milder ac-

cents. "Remain where you are, my dear, and leave the matter to me; I know how to deal with miscreants of this type."

But Lady Averill had no mind to leave things to her uncle, and, without any trace of fear or excitement in her manner beyond slightly flushed cheeks and sparkling eyes, she addressed Stephen direct.

"What do you require of me?" she asked calmly, looking him full in the face.

The cold contempt in her look and voice cut Stephen like a whiplash, and for an instant he felt as if he had lost the power of speech. From the moment in which the lovely face had appeared framed in the carriage window he had been overwhelmed with shame and disgust at the part he played. The fact that he played it for the lady's own sake comforted him not at all; he felt mean and despicable, and his eyes fell before her searching glance.

For his worst suspicions were confirmed. Lady Averill Stapleton and his unknown divinity were one and the same; and he silently cursed the malignant fate that had caused his first meeting with her to be one which brought him nothing but acute distress. In the same breath, he thanked heaven for his mask, and prayed that it might prove an effective disguise.

"Well, sir, are you dumb?" asked the lady sharply. "Do you propose to keep me here all night whilst you consider the pros and cons of the matter? What do you want of me?"

Stephen's wits returned from their wanderings, but it was only with difficulty that he managed to sustain Lady Averill's stare as he made reply.

"I want you to accompany me on a short journey, madam," he said gravely.

"Accompany you on a journey!" she exclaimed in amazement. "To whither?"

"I regret that I cannot tell you that, madam."

"But why should I accompany you on a journey? You are not prepossessing, and your ways mislike me."

"Because I ask it," replied Stephen, more sternly. "I would remind you that you are not at liberty to refuse——"

But at this juncture Sir Randolph, who had been growing more and more impatient at what he evidently considered to be unnecessary delay, left Alverford to take care of the Sergeant, and, urging his horse forward, he thrust Stephen unceremoniously to one side.

"Enough of this fooling!" he said peremptorily. "We have no time to waste in answering your questions, madam. Get out of the coach at once."

"She shall not. Stay where you are, Averill," cried Colonel Oldfield, his back still fixed against the carriage door.

Sir Randolph wasted no words on the Colonel. Instead, he manœuvred his horse into such a position that the animal's head was pointed in the same direction as the carriage, with his off-side almost touching the near front wheel. He then skilfully backed his mount, with the result that the Colonel was compelled, willy-nilly, to abandon his post.

Ignoring the torrent of oaths which fell from the chagrined soldier's lips, the baronet then stooped from his saddle and dexteriously wrenched open the carriage door.

"Now, madam, if you please," he said in commanding tones.

There was a moment's hesitation, then Lady Averill stepped out into the road. Her face was pale as death and her hands trembled; but she contrived to keep her self-possession, and her eyes showed no trace of the fear which gripped her heart. Her head was held proudly erect, yet there was about her a pathetic helplessness which she could not disguise, and which made Stephen long to reassure her. He comforted himself with the thought that her misery would be short-lived, and there and then regis-

tered a silent oath that no harm should befall her as the result of this foolish escapade.

"What do you wish me to do?" asked Lady Averill, in low, uncertain tones.

"Place your foot on mine, and I will help you to mount in front of me," replied Sir Randolph. "Have no fear; you shall not come to any harm, and my horse will easily carry both of us."

But before she could obey, there was a sound in the coppice suggestive of a heavy body being forced through the undergrowth, and a loud voice cried:

"At them, men; we have them red-handed."

Immediately everything was confusion. With a sharp command to his niece to get back into the carriage, Colonel Oldfield, displaying an agility surprising in a man of his bulk, sprang for the head of Sir Randolph's horse. With an oath, the baronet put spurs to his mount and jerked the reins to one side, with the result that the Colonel's leap was short, and he measured his length in the road. At the same moment a vivid flash of lightning heralded the coming of the storm, and to his dismay Stephen saw by its transient light that they were apparently beset on all sides by a body of men, some mounted and some on foot. He saw Sir Randolph lift his pistol and take careful aim at something ahead of the carriage, and the flash and roar of the discharge made him realize very fully the desperate situation in which he and his friends were placed.

"Ride! Ride like the devil!" shouted a voice in his ear.

The advice was good, but it was not easy to take. As he tried to urge his horse forward he felt the reins seized by another's hand, and a hoarse voice commanded him to surrender and dismount. Lifting his riding-whip, he struck with all his force at where he imagined his assailant to be, and at that instant there came a rolling crash of thunder, and a deluge of rain which blinded him. His horse reared in affright and almost unseated him, but,

although he contrived to preserve his balance, it was in vain that he attempted to soothe the frightened animal. Pandemonium reigned around him. The storm had broken in good earnest, and to the stamp of hoofs, the jingle of harness, oaths, curses, commands, and cries, were added the fierce shock of the thunder, the blinding glare of the lightning, and the malignant hiss of the downpour.

Men pressed upon Stephen; and he was only saved from being pulled from his seat by the plunging and pivoting of his horse, which effectually prevented any of the attacking party from getting to grips with him.

And suddenly the frightened horse became conscious of the dig of his rider's spurs, and with a snort set off at full gallop down the dark road, scattering Stephen's assailants as he went. They could not hope to catch him on such a night; he even doubted if they would try. He laughed as he heard the bellow of disgust which Colonel Oldfield flung after his retreating figure, and he congratulated himself upon having escaped unrecognized from such an uncomfortable predicament.

But his joy was short-lived. He had not gone fifty yards when his flying mount tripped over some obstacle and came down heavily upon its knees. Stephen was hurled through the air like a stone from a sling, his head struck a post in the hedge, and he lay motionless on the grass which bordered the road.

CHAPTER V

FINDS AND LEAVES STEPHEN IN DIRE STRAITS

IT was an exquisite morning. Nature was in her most delightful mood, and she lay smiling under the tender, lover-like kiss of youthful spring. From every tree, brake, and dell her choristers, the birds, poured forth their greetings to the radiant day, drenching with melody a landscape which had, but a few short hours ago, trembled beneath the artillery of the thunderstorm. The fairy gems of heavy dew were everywhere. They lay gleaming iridescent in the grass; they hung in flashing beauty from the sparsely clad branches of the trees; they spangled the filmy lace of the dainty webs which busy spiders had woven on the hedgerows. The poignant, unforgettable fragrance which a grateful English countryside exhales after much-needed rain hung on the still air—the most wonderful perfume in the world.

The sun had only wakened the sleeping world an hour ago, and he now shone benevolently from a pale blue sky, across which patches of cream-colored cloud moved with a leisureliness in keeping with the morning. His rays were reflected by the azure waters of a tiny lake which shone like a sapphire in the verdant setting of a trim and well-kept garden—a lake into which a laughing, dancing, miniature waterfall fell headlong in gay abandon. He sent his life-giving light into every corner of that garden; and at last, espying a pretty but strongly built summer-house standing close by the water's edge, he turned a broad

beam through its windows to fall on the still features of a man who lay at full length on its bare wooden floor.

Stephen opened his eyes to the strong light, but immediately closed them again. They felt heavy as lead, and his head throbbed painfully. His limbs were stiff and aching, his throat was parched, and his tongue seemed too big for his mouth. He tried to raise his hand to his dry lips, and, failing in his effort, became conscious of the fact that he was bound hand and foot. He lay for some moments trying to remember the circumstances which had led to his present plight, but his brain was sluggish, and he could recall only a confused impression of the events of last night.

At length, by dint of much perseverance and no little physical agony, he contrived to sit up, and was surprised to find himself gazing into the laughing blue eyes of a man who sat leaning against the opposite wall, in an attitude of obvious discomfort very similar to his own. The man was a stranger to him, yet Stephen noted that he also had his hands bound to his sides, whilst a stout piece of cord was tied tightly round his ankles.

"Good morning, Mr. Burgoyne," said the stranger pleasantly.

"Good morning," replied Stephen mechanically, in a voice that he scarcely recognized as his own.

"We find ourselves in a pretty pickle," pursued the stranger, laughing gaily.

"And one which gives us little cause for merriment," retorted Stephen sharply, irritated by the other's laughter. "I fail to see the humor of the situation, sir."

"Ah, that is because you cannot see yourself," replied his companion. "An you could, I am sure you would be as amused as I am. To see the famous Mr. Burgoyne trussed like a fowl, with his face smeared with dry blood and his clothes torn and covered with mud, is, at least, an unusual spectacle; and though doubtless 'tis painful to you to be in such a condition, you will forgive me if it

appeals to my sense of the ludicrous. As you sit there, Mr. Burgoyne, you appear a perfect specimen of the complete cut-throat."

Despite his words, there was something so charming in the stranger's manner that it disarmed Stephen, and his anger evaporated as quickly as it had arisen. Laughing in his turn, he said:

"'Fore gad, sir, you have little room to talk. Your right eye is well-nigh closed, and will be black as coal ere the day is out, your cravat is under your left ear, and your lips are cut and swollen. But a truce to compliments. My head aches most infernally, and, doubtless on that account, I am somewhat at a loss to understand how I come to be in your company. 'Twould be a charity if you could enlighten me on the point and tell me your name."

"My name is Carless—Ned o' that ilk," said the stranger whimsically. "The folks hereabouts call me the squire. As to my being here with you—well, before I explain, may I ask if you noticed aught strange about Sir Randolph Gorst last night?" As he asked the question his whimsical expression changed to one of grim earnestness.

"Yes. Now you mention it, I did," replied Stephen. "Methought him more agreeable than usual, and I confess he surprised me by the air of command which he assumed, and which became him passing well."

"Thank you for the compliment," said Carless, inclining his head with a grave smile. "I was Sir Randolph Gorst."

"You—you were—— Gad, sir, I must appear a dull-witted fool, but damme if I can make head or tail of what you are telling me."

"Yet 'tis very simple, Mr. Burgoyne. Yestere'en about six o'clock I was sitting in the coffee-room of the Bull and Royal at Worpleden, a village about five miles from here, when there entered a gentleman whom I afterwards discovered to be Sir Randolph Gorst. He looked very glum, and, methought, a trifle the worse for liquor. He

ordered a meal, and whilst he was eating he entered into conversation with the landlord, who evidently knew him well, talking in such a way that I was compelled to overhear everything that was said. I gathered from his remarks that he had quarrelled with the lady of his choice—a very headstrong young woman who had a penchant for roaming the countryside with no other escort than a decrepit old uncle."

"'Twas a strange subject to discuss with the landlord of an inn," interposed Stephen drily.

"So it was, and in other circumstances it might have aroused my suspicions. One does not expect a man in the middle thirties to prate of his mistress like a lovesick boy, but I concluded from his manner that overmuch attention to the bottle had rendered him a trifle maudlin. Hence, when he presently asked me if I did not think it the height of folly for a young and unprotected woman to travel the roads at night, I agreed with him; whereupon he told me, with a drunken, confidential air, that he had been minded to teach his fiancée a lesson which she was not likely to forget."

"Did he mention her name?" asked Stephen sharply.

"Yes. He said she was the Lady Averill Stapleton," replied Carless.

"He took some risk in making such a statement, don't you think?"

"Not he! He knew full well that I am not acquainted with Lady Averill, although of course I know her by sight."

"Hum! Proceed, sir."

"He explained to me that, after their quarrel on the previous day, she had, out of sheer perversity, set out in her carriage to visit a friend who lives some twenty or thirty miles away. She had curtly refused his escort, saying that her uncle, who accompanied her, was quite capable of taking care of her. This had so annoyed him that he had arranged with two of his friends to help him

waylay her coach on its return journey and to carry her off, in the hope that the unpleasant experience would make her less inclined to take similar risks in the future."

"A clever tale, and near enough to the truth to make no matter," murmured Stephen.

"Aye, 'twas clever, Mr. Burgoyne. But wait till you hear the end on't. He proceeded, in most disconsolate tones, to tell me that he had that day received news that compelled him to leave for London by the night mail—a circumstance which would necessitate the abandonment of his plan. 'But I don't see why it should,' I objected; for, truth to tell, the scheme struck me as being rather good, and I know only too well how necessary it is to pull up all women with a jerk now and again—that is, if a man hopes to be happy with 'em. 'Could not your friends carry it out without your aid?' 'They could, but they won't,' he answered gloomily. 'They harp upon its being a risky business, and insist that, unless I arrive at the appointed place before the carriage appears, they will allow the lady to proceed on her way in blissful ignorance of their lurking presence.' "

"It seems to me that Sir Randolph had succeeded in arousing your sympathetic interest," hazarded Stephen, with a faint smile.

"He had," confessed Carless, somewhat shamefacedly. "And, what is more, he was fully aware of the fact. However, at this juncture the landlord, who had remained in the room during the conversation, said jocularly: 'How would it be if Mr. Carless went in your stead, Sir Randolph? You are about the same height and figure, and what with a mask and the darkness your friends would never know the difference.' Gorst smiled sadly and shook his head. 'I could scarce ask such a favor of a complete stranger, landlord,' he said quietly. Nevertheless, he eyed me covertly, for he could see that the venture appealed to me, as it certainly did. Also, Mr. Burgoyne, it struck me that

here was an opportunity of earning a few guineas very easily."

Noting the involuntary expression which this last remark brought to Stephen's face, he paused for a moment, and then said with sudden harshness:

"It astonishes you that a Lancashire squire should stoop to earn money?"

"Not at all," disclaimed Stephen hastily, flushing with embarrassment. "'Twas the necessity for it that surprised me, nothing more."

"You may learn many things about me which will surprise you ere you are much older," said Carless bitterly. "And, lest you judge me too harshly on what you learn, ask yourself what you would have done had you grown to manhood in ignorance of the fact that all your father would leave you would be his blessing and an estate mortgaged beyond its value."

An embarrassed silence fell upon the two men, but at length Carless sighed, and said apologetically:

"My temper is a trifle brittle, Mr. Burgoyne, but it has been rendered so by circumstances. Let me continue my tale. To be brief, Gorst baited his trap so cleverly that at the end of half an hour I walked into it with my eyes open by offering to take his place for one hundred guineas—neither more nor less. The amount I asked staggered him, and he grew well-nigh purple in the face; but, after cursing roundly and haggling like a Jew, he saw that I was not to be moved, and he surrendered. He said that he would send the money on to me the next day when the work was done, but I insisted upon being paid that very night, otherwise I washed my hands of the affair. So very reluctantly, and only after receiving the landlord's assurance that I was to be trusted, he agreed to pay me the money I asked when he returned to the Bull and Royal to catch the night mail, which left there at eleven o'clock. 'But I must make a condition,' he said craftily. 'If by some mischance you fall foul

of the authorities, you will not in any circumstances bring my name into the matter.' The condition seemed to me to be reasonable and fair, and I at once agreed to it, whereupon he left me to await his return."

"And did he return?" asked Stephen, who, in his interest in the tale his companion told, had forgotten both his plight and his headache.

"He came back about half-past ten, and handed me one hundred guineas in gold. He gave me final instructions as to the trysting-place, full details of your plans, and told me how I might distinguish between you and Lord Alverford by your modes of speech. Then he wished me good luck, and left by the night mail at eleven o'clock."

"Then he actually went off to London," said Stephen, surprised.

"Ah, that is another matter. But he certainly went by the coach, for I saw him go. 'Twas an astute move, I vow. Yet, withal, I ought never to have allowed myself to be inveigled into the business; I might have been sure that there was more in it than he had thought fit to tell me. I, who had always prided myself on being too old a bird to be caught with chaff, walked into the trap like a veritable fledgling."

"That is the second time you have spoken of a trap," remarked Stephen. "Think you then that last night's affair was a deliberate ambuscade?"

"There is not a doubt of it," returned Carless, with quiet conviction. "You remember the noise we heard in the wood behind us when we were awaiting the coming of the coach?"

"Yes."

"Well, that was made by some member of the force which afterwards captured us, and which I am now certain was already in ambush awaiting our attempt at highway robbery and abduction."

"But I fail to see how that was possible. 'Twould

mean that someone had betrayed us; and, prior to Sir Randolph's conversation with you, our plans were known to none apart from Gorst, Lord Alverford, and myself."

"If that were so, then the obvious conclusion would be that I am the traitor," commented Carless, with an enigmatical smile.

Stephen flushed darkly. "Believe me, sir, such an idea never crossed my mind," he protested sincerely.

"I do believe you, Mr. Burgoyne," replied the other, smiling. "In any case my present condition would give the lie to the supposition. However, the riddle is not difficult to solve. Sir Randolph Gorst betrayed us!"

"'Tis a bold accusation to make, sir," said Stephen rather coldly. "How could he benefit by such a contemptible act?"

"Before I answer that, I beg leave to ask you one or two questions. Did Gorst speak the truth when he told me that the Lady Averill Stapleton is betrothed to him?"

"No, he did not. I can vouch for the fact that Lady Averill is not betrothed to anyone."

"As I thought. And is Lord Alverford a suitor for her hand?"

"I think you may call him so," smiled Stephen.

"And what of yourself, Mr. Burgoyne? You must forgive me if my questions seem impertinent; they are not asked idly, I assure you. Are you also a suppliant for the lady's favors?"

To his intense chagrin, Stephen felt the hot blood mount in a slow flood from his chin to his brow. He looked askance at his companion, and felt relieved to note that the other's gaze was directed at the rope which bound his hands to his sides and which he was vainly trying to loosen.

"I am not even acquainted with her," he said stiffly.

Carless looked up sharply. "Indeed? Well, I confess that surprises me, but it does not materially weaken my

theory. But are you quite sure that Sir Randolph does not regard you as a possible rival?"

"I don't see why he should. Lady Averill is not, to my knowledge, aware of my existence."

"Then does he bear you any grudge, any ill-will?"

"'Tis possible. There is little love lost between us."

"Ah! That removes any doubts I may have had," declared Carless, in satisfied tones. "The case is as plain as daylight. Let me reconstruct it for you. For reasons best known to yourselves, you, Gorst, and Lord Alverford planned to waylay the Lady Averill and to carry her off. To avert suspicion you were to ride out separately to a chosen meeting-place, arriving there on the stroke of midnight. What was to happen after you had captured the lady I do not know, nor is it material. But Sir Randolph's plan was more subtle and complex than either you or Lord Alverford dreamed. He knew that he was much more likely to gain the lady's favor by appearing as her rescuer than as her captor, and this was the rôle which he, doubtless from the first, assigned to himself. So, having made final arrangements with you, he set about the task of finding someone to take his place in your party. This probably proved less difficult than might be imagined. There is no doubt in my mind that he bribed the landlord of the Bull and Royal, who is a shifty customer, to put him in touch with a likely man for the purpose, for I went to Worpleden in response to a message sent to me by that individual urging me to seek him immediately, as he had news of vital import to give me. His important news proved to be an idle rumor of little moment, and I was somewhat mystified as to why he had thought it worth while to bring me a considerable distance to hear it. However, we had scarce talked the matter out when Gorst appeared; and I am now absolutely convinced that he came there by prearrangement with the landlord for no other purpose than to meet me, and that he knew who I was the moment I entered the

room. By gad! sir, he smoked me prettily, and with truly ridiculous ease."

"So 'twould seem, if your theory be well grounded," agreed Stephen. "Yet I fail to see why you should blame yourself so bitterly. There appears to me to have been little in his conduct to arouse your suspicions."

"Sir, a man in my position ought to be suspicious of everything and everybody," said Carless enigmatically. "However, the cream is spilt, and 'tis useless to cry."

Stephen pondered for a few moments; then he said dubiously: "You take much for granted, sir, or so it seems to me. From what you say, Gorst did not leave you until about seven o'clock, yet he was back again by half-past ten. He must have ridden hard and fast to get to Darnchester and back in so short a time."

Carless smiled. "There was no need for him to go to Darnchester. I take it that, before he met me, he had already laid information with the authorities as to his discovery of a plot to waylay and abduct Lady Averill Stapleton. He probably warned them to have men in readiness within easy reach of Bolderburn pending his return with further details, and no sooner had he settled with me to take his place than he went straight to the High Constable and told him to distribute his men in and around the coppice which adjoined your trysting-place. He doubtless said that they must be in position not later than half-past eleven, and that he himself would join them as soon as possible after that hour."

"But you told me that he left on the night mail for London."

"So he did, but that was only to throw dust in my eyes. It would be an easy matter to bribe the coachman to stop and set him down; and I'll wager that he had a horse somewhere along the road awaiting him, and that he did not travel by the coach for more than a mile. But, however

that may be, he was certainly with the party that ambushed us, for I heard his voice."

"You are sure of that?"

"As sure as I am that, given reasonable time, I shall get free of these accursed ropes," asserted Carless, who during the whole of the conversation had unceasingly endeavored to loosen his bonds. "'Twas he who shouted the orders, and once I heard him swear in unmistakable fashion."

"Your tale hangs well together, sir," conceded Stephen thoughtfully. "But even yet I can scarce believe that he would ruthlessly sacrifice three men for so paltry a gain."

"Why, Mr. Burgoyne, that was the most astute part of his scheme," cried Carless, regarding Stephen with eyes that showed surprise at his innocence. "Indeed, I'll go so far as to say that our sacrifice was his main object. Otherwise, why do you and I lie here in durance? By appearing on the scene with three or four men at his back he could have compelled us to beat a hasty and inglorious retreat, leaving him to receive the full measure of the lady's gratitude for his timely intervention. But instead of that he brought with him a band that numbered fully a dozen, for the simple reason that he did not intend that any one of us should escape. Don't you see that if he contrived to capture Lord Alverford in the very act of holding up a coach on the king's highway he disposed of him for all time as a possible suitor for the lady's hand? With regard to you, he discredited you once and for all in the eyes of society, at the same time making it appear that he himself was both a hero and a public benefactor. As for me—well, I was only a pawn in the game, and not worthy of a second thought; and perhaps he hoped to regain the guineas which he had paid me, for he would doubtless think that, in the short time at my disposal, I should have been unable to unburden myself of them for lack of a safe place in which to hide them."

"And did he regain them?" asked Stephen, laughing

at the whimsical tone in which Carless made his last remark.

"No, he did not," returned Carless, with a dry smile. "The money was securely hidden within ten minutes of my receiving it. My pockets were very thoroughly searched, and their contents taken from me, but I am the poorer only by a pistol, a clasp-knife, and a few shillings."

"You surprise me, sir. I should have thought a man of Sir Randolph Gorst's wealth would disdain to trouble about a few paltry guineas."

"My dear sir, 'tis usually those who are most richly endowed with this world's goods who take most care of 'em."

"Aye, that is true. But to return to last night. It would appear that Alverford escaped."

"I hope and think he did. Do you recollect hearing a shot fired?"

"Yes; 'twas that which first made me realize the seriousness of our position."

"Well, I fired that shot. I could see by the light of the carriage lamps that Lord Alverford had a good chance of getting clear if he acted at once. It was impossible to shout and tell him what to do without warning our attackers, so I lifted my pistol and fired so as to graze the flanks of his horse. 'Twas a desperate remedy, but it succeeded beyond my hopes. The horse, stung by the pain of the wound, set off like a startled rabbit, and leapt the hedge on the opposite side of the road to the coppice. That was the last I saw of his lordship, but I am confident he got away, otherwise he would doubtless be here with us now."

"Thank heaven for that!" breathed Stephen fervently. "'Tis the first ray of light in a gloomy outlook. Methought that shot was fired in anger, and I feared that blood might have been spilled. That would have made our predicament infinitely worse, and, goodness knows, 'tis bad enough as it is. What do you think will happen to us?"

"I think that if they will only leave us undisturbed for a few minutes more our captors will find that their birds have flown," cried Carless exultantly. "See, my hands are free at last, and I will soon rid me of the rope that binds my ankles. Then 'twill——"

But at this moment the murmur of voices fell upon his ear, and footsteps crunching the gravel told of the approach of men. He tore feverishly at the knots which held him, and it seemed to Stephen, who watched him with anxious eyes, that he could not possibly accomplish his task before their gaolers appeared. But Ned's good fairy had evidently returned to her duties, although the knot still held when the footsteps ceased at the door of the summer-house and they heard Colonel Oldfield say peremptorily:

"The key, Sergeant. Give me the key."

"Haven't got it, sir," came in tones of respectful surprise. "You have it yourself, sir."

"Of course I haven't got it," rasped the Colonel irritably. "What the devil should I be doing with the confounded key? You're a fool, Sergeant Ball."

"But I gave it to you myself last night, sir," returned the Sergeant patiently. "You'll remember that after we had locked up them two robbers, you said as how you'd take the key yourself, sir, so as nobody couldn't play any hanky-panky tricks, sir."

"Of course; of course. Why the blazes didn't ye remind me of that before I left the house? And 'twould be more dutiful and soldierly in you if you went and fetched it instead of standing there arguing like a pestilent lawyer."

"Very good, sir. Might I make so bold as to ask where it is?"

"How the deuce should I know where it is? D'ye think I have naught else to think about but keys? I'm a soldier, Sergeant Ball, not a prison warden. Go look on my dressing-table, and go at the double."

The prisoners breathed sighs of relief as they heard the Sergeant retreat at an uneven jog-trot down the path.

"'Fore gad! that was a stroke of luck," whispered Carless, again working industriously at his bonds. "I'd give all Sir Randolph's guineas for my clasp knife."

"'Twould be cheap at the price," agreed Stephen fervently.

"It would indeed. Mr. Burgoyne, mark well what I say. Lacking a knife it will not be possible for me to release you before the Sergeant returns with that key. But desperate situations need desperate remedies. In another minute I shall be free, and I am going to make a dash for it. You may think that I am deserting you, but such is not the case. I can serve you better free than by remaining with you, and if I am fortunate enough to get clear, I will not rest until I have contrived your escape. Keep up your spirits, and trust in me whatever may befall you. Ah! at last," he concluded, as the recalcitrant knot gave way.

With some difficulty he rose to his feet and stretched himself; then, noiseless as a cat, he stepped across to where his companion lay. He lifted Stephen into a more comfortable position, and then tiptoed round the room in the forlorn hope of finding some instrument with which he might sever his bonds. But, even as he searched, an impatient call from Colonel Oldfield urging the Sergeant to hasten told of the latter's approach with the key. There was no time to be lost. Carless sprang towards an unshuttered lattice window which was on the side of the summer-house farthest from the door, and tried to open it. But the catch was rusted through disuse, and refused to move. Quick as thought he seized a heavy chair, and with one blow smashed the little diamond-shaped panes into a thousand pieces. Disregarding the jagged pieces of glass which still clung to the broken leads, he flung a hasty farewell to Stephen and lit-

erally threw himself through the aperture which he had made.

The resounding crash of the violently shattered glass galvanized the Colonel into instant action. Shouting a warning to the Sergeant, he ran round the summer-house with surprising speed, and was within a yard of Carless when the latter regained his feet after his headlong leap. But he failed to stay the fugitive. Carless easily eluded the grasp of his outstretched hand, and, side-stepping, turned and darted off towards the little waterfall at the head of the lake.

Carless's situation was even more desperate than he had anticipated. One glance had shown him that as much of the garden as lay within range of his vision was enclosed by a high stone wall which would be mighty difficult, if not impossible, to scale. There was no sign of a gateway, and the only group of trees which appeared to offer temporary cover was some distance away, in the direction from which the Sergeant was approaching as rapidly as a slightly lame leg would permit him.

But Carless's presence of mind seldom deserted him. His quick brain told him that somewhere close at hand there must be a gap in the wall through which flowed the stream that fed the lake, so without hesitation he made for the waterfall. Bushes and shrubs grew about it, and he felt that if only he could reach those bushes he would be safe—at all events for the moment.

The Colonel divined his intention on the instant, and stopped short. "He's making for the fall," he bellowed. "Shoot him, Sergeant. Quick, man. Shoot; shoot."

The Sergeant stood still, and, raising a heavy double-barrelled pistol which he had pulled from his pocket, took steady aim and fired.

The range was long for a pistol, and the first shot was a miss, but even as the second report shattered the peace

of the morning the fugitive pitched forward on his face and lay still.

"Damned fine shot, Sergeant Ball!" cried the Colonel exultantly. "Couldn't have winged him better myself, damme if I could."

But the Colonel's joy was short-lived. As he and his henchman walked forward towards where it lay, the still form was suddenly imbued with life. Showing no sign of a wound, Carless leapt lightly to his feet, and, running easily and swiftly, reached the bushes long before the chagrined Sergeant could reload. Turning, he waved a laughing farewell to his pursuers, and disappeared from view.

"Damn the fellow's impudence!" roared the Colonel. "How dare he bubble me with that rotten, moth-eaten, hoary-whiskered trick? He'll laugh on the other side of his ugly face when I catch him, the impertinent villian! Forward, Sergeant; we may get another shot at him."

The two old soldiers hurried as fast as their legs could carry them to the spot where Carless had disappeared, the Sergeant reloading his pistol as he went. But no sign of the fugitive could they see. Diligent searching among the bushes, and much scrambling over rocks and boulders to the accompaniment of lurid language from the Colonel, revealed nothing, and at last they were compelled to abandon the chase.

Colonel Oldfield seated himself on a large stone, and, removing his hat, fell to mopping his heated brow with a large colored handkerchief. The Sergeant eyed him with considerable apprehension, but as the minutes passed without any sign of the expected explosion, he concluded that his master had forgotten him, and with a sigh of relief began to steal quietly away. But he had not gone ten yards when a command to halt froze him in his tracks.

"Sergeant Ball, come here, sir," cried the Colonel peremptorily.

The Sergeant limped back to where he sat and stood stiffly at attention.

"What have you to say for yourself, Sergeant?" enquired the Colonel blandly.

"Nothing, sir."

"Ah, indeed. Nothing, eh? Hum! Take off your hat." The order was curt.

Sheepishly the Sergeant uncovered his stiff, short-cropped grey hair, looking, despite his age, ridiculously like a naughty schoolboy.

"Sergeant Ball, I am grievously disappointed in you," pursued the Colonel weightily. "You are inefficient—nay, damme, you are totally incompetent. You are a disgrace to the regiment, sir; you have brought shame on the uniform you wear—ah, that is, of course"—the Colonel coughed to cover his mistake—"the uniform you used to wear. D'ye hear? You are the worst shot in all the armies of Europe; a black African nigger who had never before seen or heard of a pistol could wipe the floor with you as a marksman. You, a soldier! Why, you are not worthy to carry bow and arrows, let alone modern firearms. Sergeant Ball, you are dismissed the service."

"Very good, sir," replied the Sergeant meekly, and, turning right about, he put on his hat and marched away with as much military percision as his lame leg would permit.

CHAPTER VI

DESCRIBES THE COLONEL'S MORTIFICATION, THE SERGEANT'S DILEMMA, AND LADY AVERILL'S TRIUMPH

THE Sergeant, with never a glance, had passed by the summer-house in which lay the remaining prisoner, and was proceeding steadily along the path when a voice which offered a marked contrast to that which had lately assaulted his ears called his name. Turning, he espied, famed in a little creeper-covered arbor, the daintiest picture of fragrant womanhood that he could have found in a long day's march. So in keeping with her beautiful surroundings was she, so exquisitely a part of the perfect, radiant morning, that Sergeant Ball instantly forgot his troubles, and his face lighted with unalloyed pleasure as he went forward to do her homage.

And verily she was worthy of any man's homage as she sat with parted lips and laughing eyes expectantly regarding the humble worshipper who now hurried towards her. The sunbeams which contrived to find their way through the dense foliage caressed the soft glory of her uncovered hair with a magic touch that added a thousand elusive gleams to its golden radiance, and dappled her white muslin gown with a pattern more delicate and appealing than ever designer conceived. The crimson blossom which she had carelessly pinned in her corsage nestled close against her as though it loved the charming being whose hands had plucked it; even the very creepers which surrounded her seemed to be stretching out their long, graceful tendrils in mute endeavor to touch her.

"Methinks you are very stiff in the back this morning, Sergeant, and when I called you you were far too solemn for a bright spring day," she rallied him gaily. "Pray tell me what is the matter."

"The Colonel has discharged me, miss." The Sergeant had never been able to break himself of the habit of calling her "miss," despite repeated lessons in the correct mode of address from his master.

"What, again?" laughed Averill. "I vow 'tis becoming quite a daily occurrence."

"I reckon he means it this time, miss," said the Sergeant solemnly. "It's a seriouser matter nor usual, this here."

"Is it indeed?" She mimicked his gravity, but her eyes were alight with mirth. " 'Tis full early in the day for a serious quarrel. Doubtless my uncle's liver is troubling him."

" 'Taint his liver, miss, nor yet his rheumatics. It's me, miss—me and my cussed pistol."

"Indeed. And what have you and your pistol been doing?"

"Why, we missed him clean, we did, miss. It's like this, miss. That condanged pistol o' mine is a double-barrilled 'un, and it kicks like an eight-legged mule. Now I ain't making excuses, you'll understand, miss, but it's only a matter o' five weeks and two days since I traded with a sea-farin' fellow for that cussed pistol, and I ain't got the feel of it yet, so to speak. In consequence o' which, I missed him—missed him twice; me as was the best marksman in the regiment! So you can't blame the Colonel for giving me my discharge, now, can you, miss?"

"But I don't understand. I heard your shots, but I never dreamed that they were fired in anger; I merely thought that you were practising. Do you mean that you tried to shoot somebody and failed?" asked Averill, becoming more serious, and wrinkling her brows in pretty perplexity.

"That's it, miss. It was one of them robbers as was catched last night as was escapin' right under our very noses,

and owin' to my dinged pistol he got clean through our lines as nice as nip."

"He escaped?"

"He did an' all, miss. Leapt to one side when I fired my first round, dropped down pretendin' to be killed after I fired my second, then jumped up, laughed at us, and bunked. The Colonel's very sore about it; it'll make him look such a fool—er—beg pardon, miss, I mean a idjit—when the High Constable comes, d'ye see, miss?"

"But how did the prisoner come to be hiding in our garden?"

"He wasn't hidin' in it, miss; he was doing his level best to get out of it. You'll recall that last night High Constable and his men captured two o' the enemy. Well, he was for takin' 'em to Darnchester gaol then and there, but Sir Randolph Gorst, him as was evidently general-officer-commanding-in-chief o' the patrol, said as it was too risky to travel twenty mile on a black night like last night with two slippery customers like them robbers. He likewise said as if they escaped it wouldn't be an easy matter to catch 'em again, as they couldn't be identified very well owing to 'em not having been seen in the daylight. So they were fetched here and locked in the summer-house, Sir Randolph saying as he would come over with Mr. Crisp early today to examine 'em in preparation for the court-martial."

"And they escaped after all. I fear Sir Randolph Gorst will be ill-pleased when he hears the news," commented Averill, with a peculiar little smile.

"Oh, no, not both of 'em, miss; only one of 'em," the Sergeant corrected her.

"Then what of the other? Is he still in the summer-house?" she queried, with a sharpness which made it appear that the additional information gave her little pleasure.

"Bless my soul, miss, why, I'd clean forgot about him,"

confessed the Sergeant, his eyes full of consternation at this unparalleled neglect of duty.

A whimsical smile crossed Averill's face. "Well, I don't see that it was any concern of yours," she said airily. "You forget that you had already been discharged."

"True, miss," agreed the Sergeant uneasily, "but you'll understand——"

"I understand exactly, Sergeant," she interrupted, silencing him with a gesture, "and I repeat that the prisoner's safe custody is no longer your concern."

"What's that ye say, young woman?" broke in a harsh voice. "Can I believe my own ears? D'ye mean to tell me that you are inciting this infernal scallywag of a Sergeant to mutiny?"

The Colonel had approached unnoticed over the lawn, the soft green turf preventing his footsteps from heralding his coming. Averill turned her head with slow deliberation, and regarded him coolly.

"I pray you tell me, uncle, how can a man mutiny when he is not in the service?" She spoke with an air of polite enquiry.

"Tush, madam! You interfere in matters which do not concern you, and which are beyond a woman's ken," blustered the Colonel, trying to meet her glance and failing signally.

"Think you so, uncle dear?" she queried sweetly. "Alas! we poor women are doubtless very stupid, and our wits move slowly. But our curiosity is insatiable, and we must needs ask questions lest our weak brains be turned by the unsatisfied longing for knowledge which will not let us rest. Thus I am dying to know how fares your one remaining prisoner. Is he disconsolate that he still remains in durance when his companion has been allowed to escape?"

The Colonel's face flushed a rich, full-bodied crimson with embarrassment. "His companion was not allowed to escape, madam," he growled uncomfortably.

"Ah, then you recaptured him after Sergeant Ball had left you," she said softly, looking up at him with innocent eyes full of admiring wonder.

"No, I did not," shouted the mortified Colonel. "Dammit, madam, you would exasperate a saint, and Sergeant Ball is a blabbing, tale-telling old washerwoman."

"Sergeant Ball is nothing of the kind," she contradicted pertly. "He was courteous enough to gratify my woman's inquisitiveness, that is all, sir. 'Tis a pity that you do not profit by his example."

"Gad's blades, young woman, but you go too far! Discipline in this household has gone to the dogs. But I'll alter that, damme! Go to your room, madam, and go at once. We'll see if a day or two on bread and water will make you understand that I command here, and that I will not be defied by a pert chit of a girl. D'ye hear me?"

"I' faith, yes, I hear you, sir; and I should say that the deafest man in the village can also hear you quite plainly." She made no movement to obey his orders, but gazed with languid eyes in the direction of the summer-house, towards which the Sergeant kept sending uneasy glances. "But 'tis too fine a day to spend in my room, and bread and water as a spring diet does not appeal to me, so I prefer to remain where I am, and to take my meals as usual."

"D'ye dare to disobey me openly, you undutiful hussy?" he cried, glaring at her as though he were about to assault her. "By Jupiter! madam, you'll——"

"I'll do nothing that does not please me, sir," she interrupted him coolly. "You seem to forget that I came of age five years ago, and that I live in your house, not because I am compelled, but because I——"

She stopped, and, glancing at him covertly from under her drooping lashes, saw a spasm of pain flit across his angry face.

"Yes? Because you what, madam?" he asked gruffly.

"Why, because I am foolish enough to be far too fond

of a terrible old tyrant who constantly tries to bully me," she replied softly, smiling up at him suddenly and radiantly.

The Colonel's face lighted magically, and he cleared his throat with inordinate vigor. Stooping, he took her hand and kissed it with a strange mixture of love and reverence; but ere he could straighten his back her arms were round his neck and her lovely cheek was pressed close against his lined red face. Then she pulled him down into the seat beside her, and sat contentedly with her golden head resting on his shoulder and his arm close about her.

"Averill, my dear, you are wonderful," he murmured at length. "You will drive the man you marry to distraction on occasion, but you will also lift him into a heaven such as few mortals find in this life." Then, catching sight of the Sergeant, whom he had completely forgotten, and who was beaming with satisfaction at the happy ending to the little comedy which he had just witnessed for the hundredth time, he roared: "What the devil are you grinning at, you ape? How dare you stand there spying and listening when you have been dismissed the service? Go pack your kit and get you gone."

The Sergeant saluted and turned sorrowfully away, but he had not taken two steps when Lady Averill bade him stop. She had lifted her head from her uncle's shoulder, and was sitting bolt upright in her seat.

"One moment, Sergeant, if you please," she said. "Do I understand, uncle, that your decision to discharge Sergeant Ball is irrevocable?"

"Absolutely, madam," replied the Colonel, scowling fiercely.

"I am very pleased to hear it," she said calmly.

The two men stared at her in blank amazement, then over the Sergeant's face spread a look of infinite sorrow that cut the Colonel to the quick.

"I take it that you will find a new employer, Sergeant," she observed, in the same calm tones.

"I hope so, miss," replied the Sergeant heavily. "I am not as young as I used to be, and it isn't everybody as will employ a man as is lame. Old soldiers isn't much use to anybody, you'll understand, miss."

"I see. How old are you, then?"

"Fifty-two, miss."

"'Tis a great age."

"Perhaps it is, miss, though I can't say as I feel very old most days."

"Hum! Well, I know somebody who wants an old soldier with a lame leg who is fifty-two years old."

"Do you, miss?" queried the Sergeant, brightening a little. "I'd take it kindly if you'd tell me his name and where he may be found."

"Oh, it isn't a he; it's a she," returned Averill.

"What, a woman, miss?" he cried, visibly disappointed. "I can't see as I'd be very much use to a woman, miss."

"On the contrary, I think you would, and for my sake I should like you to offer yourself for the post. Will you?"

"I'd do anything for your sake, miss. Where does the lady live?" asked the Sergeant wistfully.

"Here," she replied, a spark of mischief beginning to dance in her eyes.

"Here, miss?" echoed the perplexed Sergeant.

"Yes, here. I am the person who requires a man-servant, and as you have agreed to offer yourself for the position I accept your offer, Sergeant. You will take up your duties this very instant."

It is impossible to describe the amazement with which her auditors received this cool announcement. The Sergeant stared at her for a moment with wide-open eyes, as though he could not credit his own ears, but his look of astonishment slowly gave place to one of delighted satisfaction. Yet when he tried to thank her something stuck in his throat, something which needed swallowing

but which was very difficult to swallow, something which caused him to cough hoarsely and ineffectually.

However, his late employer, recovering at last from his stupefaction, was in no mind to let this flagrant flouting of his authority pass unchallenged. He glared first at his niece, then at the Sergeant, and back again; but both of them appeared entirely oblivious of the anger within him which clamored for expression, and which dyed his face to a rich port-wine shade. So, springing to his feet, he roared:

"Gad's blades! madam, d'ye defy me? Am I no longer master in my own house? I forbid you to employ this wastrel; I will not have it. You—you are an impertinent baggage; yes, I repeat, a baggage, madam. And as for you, Sergeant Ball, I'll——"

"You'll please sit down and be quiet, uncle," interposed Averill icily. "I do not permit outside interference with my personal servants, please remember that. Also I think you are very rude, sir; the title of baggage mislikes me exceedingly."

But the Colonel was thoroughly roused and not disposed to be lightly turned from his purpose. He could be stubborn as a mule on occasion, and the loss of his prisoner still rankled in his mind. Distasteful though they were, he was chagrined beyond measure at his failure to carry out the duties which the High Constable had thrust upon him; and he was quite convinced that the Sergeant alone was to blame for the prisoner's escape. So, disregarding his niece's command, he took a step forward to where that unfortunate individual stood eyeing him with nervous apprehension.

"Are you going to obey my orders, you mutinous dog?" he rasped.

"No, he is not," said Averill sharply, before the Sergeant could reply.

"Dammit, madam, will you hold your tongue? I was

not addressing you." He turned again to the Sergeant, and glared at him balefully. "Once again I order you to pack your kit and to leave my house. I await your departure."

The picture presented by the two men was so comical that Averill had considerable difficulty in preserving her gravity. The Colonel was short and stout, and stood with his sturdy legs planted wide apart, looking fiercely up at the Sergeant who, well over six feet high, held his tall, thin figure stiff and straight as a ramrod—the personification of indecision and distress. Averill was irresistibly reminded of a plump and ill-conditioned terrior bullying a lean mastiff, and bullying him successfully, too. For there was little doubt that the Sergeant was wavering; the habits of a lifetime fought against him, and she saw that a few more seconds would encompass both his defeat and hers. And she, for one, had no mind to be defeated, so she attacked again—this time with a different weapon.

"Methinks, uncle, that the shocking temper in which you chance to be this morning is causing you to forget your duty," she said languidly.

He turned on her sharply, touched on the raw. "My duty, madam? I'd have you know that 'tis not my habit to forget my duty. What the devil d'ye mean?"

"Oh, nothing in particular," she replied carelessly. "But I understand that only one of your prisoners escaped. What became of the other?"

"Why, he is in the summer-house, of course," he snapped irritably.

"Are you sure of that?" she enquired sweetly.

"Of course I'm s——" he began; then he stopped, and a look of uncertainty and alarm came into his eyes.

Quick to see her advantage, Averill rose from her seat and confronted him.

"You are not sure, sir," she said accusingly. "So you *are* neglecting your duty. Have you seen him this morning?"

"Er—no," said the Colonel uneasily, dropping his eyes before her steady gaze. "I was just about to—er—to visit the captives when I saw one of 'em escaping, and I followed him. Isn't that so, Sergeant?"

"Yes, sir," returned the Sergeant promptly.

"And, having failed to recapture him, you of course went to see that his companion was still secure?" she pursued mercilessly.

"Er—well—er—that is, no, madam. To be quite candid, Averill, I forgot all about the second man in the loss of the first," said the Colonel frankly, gazing at her with appealing eyes.

"Dear me! Was that the way that you did things in the Army?" she asked, raising her eyebrows. "And then you have the audacity to say that such matters are beyond a woman's ken! Well, sir, what are you going to do?"

"Do, madam, do?" said the Colonel, quivering under the lash of her tongue. "What the devil can I do?"

"Well, first you can apologize for calling me a baggage, second you can kiss me if you do it nicely, and third you can take the Sergeant with you and look to that poor man in the summer-house without further delay."

Colonel Oldfield hesitated a moment; then, placing his arm round her waist, he pulled her to him with rough tenderness. "You are not a baggage, dear, and I was a boor to call you so; I pray you forgive me," he said. "On the contrary, you are the most ravishing, most tantalizing, most adorable creature in all Europe."

"That is much better, sir," she said graciously. "I think—yes, I think you may kiss me."

And kiss her he did, with almost as much fervor as though he were her lover instead of her uncle.

"Fie, sir! I vow you hug like any bear," she reproved him laughingly. "'Tis a thousand pities you never married, uncle; you would, I think, have made a very excellent husband."

He released her, and turned away abruptly to hide the shadow which her words had brought into his eyes.

"Nay, my dear, I am better as I am," he said quietly. "I fear I should be a sore trial to any woman." Then, suddenly recollecting his trust, he said abruptly: "Come, Sergeant. We will see to our prisoner."

Averill regarded the two men with thoughtful eyes as they marched away. Her victory was complete, and she knew it. But although she felt sure, by virtue of many similar experiences, that the breach between her uncle and the Sergeant was healed, she was puzzled to know why she had been compelled to fight so hard to heal it. Scarcely a week ever went by without the fiery old soldier dismissing his servant at least once, but usually these incidents were forgotten by everyone concerned within an hour or two of their happening. This time, however, the Colonel had shown surprising obstinacy, and she could not help thinking that his perturbation arose from a deeper cause than the escape of a captured cutpurse who had been committed to his charge. The strong bond of mutual admiration, affection, and esteem that existed between master and man had been rendered almost unbreakable by years of close association; they had shared alike danger, hardship, safety, and comfort, and she could not conceive that either of them would willingly sever that bond without extreme provocation. Yet her uncle had most certainly shown every desire to sever it that morning, and the circumstance worried her greatly as she walked slowly back to the house.

The Colonel spoke no word as he led the way to the summer-house. His anger was gone, and he never bore malice, but he felt that his dignity demanded that he should not as yet show any undue cordiality towards his henchman. Being nearly ten years the Sergeant's senior, he had never ceased to regard him as a somewhat irresponsible young man who must, upon occasion, be made to remember his lack of years and experience; and it was unbecoming

in a senior officer to be affable to any man whom he had just been compelled to reprimand with unusual severity.

However, having come to the door of the summer-house, a thought struck him, and he addressed the Sergeant sternly.

"One moment before you open the door, Sergeant. Who was responsible for the tying up of these men last night? Was it you?"

"No, sir," replied the Sergeant eagerly. "It was some o' Mr. Crisp's men as did it, under the orders of Sir Randolph Gorst."

"Was it done properly?"

"Well, it wasn't done as I should ha' done it myself, sir. But Sir Randolph was very partic'lar, and he made 'em do one of 'em twice over."

"Was that the one who escaped?"

"No, I don't think so, sir."

"Why don't you think so?"

"Because him as escaped were clean and whole, sir, but the one as were tied up twice was covered with mud—to say nothing o' the blood which had run down his face from a cut in his temple."

"He had been injured in the fray, then?"

"It was him as was throwed from his hoss, sir, attemptin' to get through our lines."

Lying in misery in his bonds, with his head aching with redoubled energy, Stephen had been a prey to acute anxiety as to his late companion's well-being. The two shots which he had plainly heard had, for a while, filled him with apprehension; but as the minutes dragged slowly by without his privacy being invaded, he began to take heart again and to hope that Carless had got away unscathed.

And now the conversation which took place outside his prison confirmed his hope, for it told him quite definitely what he wished to know. But it also confirmed Carless's conviction that Sir Randolph Gorst was intent upon his own undoing, and he marvelled at the lengths to which

the baronet had gone to accomplish it. However, he had little time to speculate upon the matter before the door opened to admit his gaolers.

The anxious face with which the Colonel entered the room showed obvious relief when his eyes fell upon his prisoner, still bound hand and foot; but after a sharp glance at him he crossed to the broken window and examined it closely.

"Damn the fellow!" he ejaculated. "He has made a most infernal mess of this window. How did he do it?"

"With this here chair, sir," said the Sergeant, picking up the chair and setting it upon its legs.

"Hum! Well, he might have opened it decently instead of smashing it to atoms."

"Expect he was in too big a hurry to worry about that, sir," returned the Sergeant.

"Is that the rope he was bound with?" asked the Colonel presently, pointing to some cord which lay on the floor.

"Yes, sir."

"Was it cut?"

"No, sir; it was untied."

"And how the devil did he manage to untie it?"

"Dunno, sir. It must ha' been a hard job."

The Colonel grunted, and placing the chair directly in front of Stephen, he sat down in it.

"Now, sir, attend to me," he said brusquely, fixing Stephen with stern eyes. "Who are you?"

"That is for you to find out, sir," replied his prisoner pleasantly.

"Let me warn you that insolence will benefit you little," snapped the Colonel, flushing angrily.

"And in return let me tell you that curiosity will benefit you not at all," retorted Stephen coolly.

With an effort the Colonel controlled his temper. It was difficult to tell from his unkempt appearance what manner

of man this captured criminal was, but his cultured accents and well-cut garments surprised the Colonel and roused his curiosity. But he was no fool, and he saw at once that if he wished to learn anything it behoved him to treat his prisoner more tactfully.

"You do not propose to answer my questions then," he remarked, in a milder tone.

"Not unless it pleases me to do so," returned Stephen.

"Ah! Then will it please you to tell me if your companion was assisted in his escape by someone from outside?"

"It can harm no one to tell you that. My companion, by dint of much perseverance and effort, wriggled free of his bonds unaided."

"And why did he not release you also?"

"Because he lacked the time. He had nothing to work with except his bare hands, and his ankles were still bound when we first heard your voices outside the door."

"Then if I had not been obliged to send the Sergeant back for the key we should have been in time," ventured the Colonel, with an uneasy glance at his servant's expressionless face.

"Undoubtedly you would."

"Hum! Then I was to blame, after all," he murmured in a low voice, more to himself than to anyone else. Then in louder tones he said:

"I understand from what took place last night that you held up my coach with the intention of abducting my niece. Am I right?"

"Perfectly right," said Stephen, realizing that, as this fact was already known to several people who could and would be called to witness against him should he come up for trial, there was nothing to be gained by denying it.

"May I ask the reason for such ungallant conduct?"

"No ungallantry was intended, sir," said Stephen stiffly, flushing hotly under his grime. "It was not proposed to

treat the Lady Averill with aught but the courtesy becoming to her sex and rank."

"Gad's blades! you surprise me," said the Colonel, with heavy sarcasm. "Do you, then, consider it courtesy to carry off an unprotected female at the point of a pistol in the dead of night?"

"That was but the means to an end," replied Stephen, acutely uncomfortable under this embarrassing cross-examination. "I repeat that it was not intended to harm her in any way."

"Hum! Methinks you will find the judge difficult to convince on that point," opined the Colonel drily. "However, we will waive it for the moment. Was it your intention, then, to hold her to ransom?"

"Ransom!" ejaculated Stephen, with such unfeigned astonishment as to convince the Colonel that his guess was wide of the mark. "Good heavens! no; certainly not."

"Then it was not money that you were after at all?"

"No, it wasn't," snapped Stephen, his pride quivering to the sting of these unpleasant questions.

The Colonel turned to the Sergeant with a peculiar smile. "Do you think he is telling the truth, Sergeant Ball?" he asked.

"Sure of it, sir," replied the Sergeant promptly.

"Well, strangely enough, so am I," said the Colonel. Then, narrowing his eyes suddenly, he snapped out: "Who hired you for the task?"

The question was so unexpected that Stephen was taken by surprise, and he hesitated before answering. For an instant he was sorely tempted to say "Sir Randolph Gorst," but, notwithstanding his intense desire to get even with his betrayer, some instinct warned him that it would be an unwise course to take. No, the time would come when he would repay the baronet's perfidy with interest, but that time was not yet. So instead he replied:

"Nobody hired me, sir."

But his hesitation had not passed unnoticed by the astute old soldier. What little information he had extracted from his captive had strengthened an already-formed suspicion that the incidents of last night had a deeper significance than was apparent on the surface. It was the recollection of the timeliness of the rescue that had first given birth to this suspicion. To anyone with the most elementary knowledge of matters military it would have been obvious that the arrival of the High Constable's posse at the critical moment was no accident of circumstance, but that, on the contrary, it was the result of a carefully planned coup. Furthermore, he could not understand how Sir Randolph came to be in command of the force; and the baronet's insistence upon the captives being confined in his premises until the daylight had puzzled him still further.

The reason which Sir Randolph had advanced for the latter precaution was entirely unconvincing. He had with him at least a dozen well-armed men, and the Colonel did not see how it could be possible for the prisoners to escape the vigilance of such an escort, even on the darkest night. Lastly, he was beginning to feel certain that the man before him was no common cutpurse. His clothes, muddy and disarranged though they were, and his refined speech were not altogether in keeping with the trade of highway robbery, and his cool and haughty demeanor was quite the reverse of what the Colonel had expected.

"I am going to make you an offer, my friend, and one which you will be wise to consider carefully," said Colonel Oldfield weightily, after a short silence. "I have influence with the authorities, and am prepared to use it on your behalf on certain conditions." He paused for a reply, but as none was forthcoming he continued: "My terms are these. If you will tell me the names of your accomplices in last night's outrage I give you my word that you shall be free ere the day is out."

Stephen smiled. "Are you not taking a grave risk?"

he said quizzically. "'Twould be an easy matter for me to give you two or three imaginary names, and you would have no proof that I did not speak the truth."

"I am quite prepared to trust you without proof of any kind," retorted the Colonel quietly.

For a moment Stephen stared at him in complete astonishment; then he again colored painfully. "I cannot accept your offer," he said curtly.

"Would you not be better advised to give it your careful consideration?" asked the Colonel blandly.

"It needs no consideration; my refusal is final."

"As you please; but I fear you are making a mistake. In any case, I should have thought the offer merited your thanks," commented the Colonel reprovingly.

"Thanks!" echoed Stephen, with a short hard laugh. "I give thanks to nobody for inviting me to become an informer, sir."

Without further parley the Colonel rose to his feet. "What time is it, Sergeant?" he enquired, walking towards the door.

The Sergeant lugged a huge silver watch from his pocket. "Nigh nine o'clock, sir," he replied.

"Gad's blades! and I am still on the wrong side of my breakfast."

"So am I," interposed Stephen flippantly.

"Why, bless my life, so you are! I suppose 'tis incumbent upon us to feed you, though it seems a shocking waste to give good food to a man who will shortly hang from a gibbet. What do you say, Sergeant?"

"He must be mighty hungry, not to say thirsty, sir," replied the Sergeant, with a hint of compassion in his voice. "We ought to give him something, sir."

"Hum! Well, he shall have some bread and water," said the Colonel gruffly. "But first he must be moved; we cannot afford to run any more risk of escapes. Go and fetch Dixon and one of the grooms, and have him carried

to the stables. There is an empty loose-box there, and once he is inside it somebody must remain on guard at the door until he is taken out of my hands. You understand, Sergeant?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then go. I will remain here until you return."

The Sergeant departed on his errand, leaving Stephen a prey to consternation. If he were removed from the summer-house, it would surely render Carless's promise of rescue impossible of fulfilment. Carless would be at a loss to know whither he had gone, and the delay which must necessarily ensue before he could locate the new prison would be fatal to his plans. For time pressed. Once in the hands of the High Constable and his minions all hope of escape would be gone, and Stephen knew that the arrival of that officer of the law to claim his prisoners might be expected at any moment.

But it was not long before his unpleasant musings were cut short by the return of the Sergeant, accompanied by two burly fellows who promptly seized Stephen by the shoulders and ankles and, despite his size, lifted him without the slightest difficulty. Under Colonel Oldfield's directions, they carried him for a distance of about a hundred yards, and at length entered a large loose-box which stood at the end of a block of stables and deposited him on a heap of soft, sweet-smelling hay. The hay had obviously been placed there quite recently, and Stephen knew instinctively that he had the Sergeant to thank for this kindly endeavor to ease his lot. He sent a grateful glance in his direction, but received only a stolid stare in reply.

"Now, Dixon, you will remain on guard immediately outside the door, and you will not desert your post for anyone or anything without my express orders," said the Colonel briskly.

"Very good, sir," responded Dixon, a big, taciturn-look-

ing fellow whose dress proclaimed him to be a gardener, and from whom Stephen had small hope of getting any concession.

"Mightn't I loosen his bonds a bit, sir?" ventured the Sergeant, as his master turned to leave. "He'll be feeling sore and stiff, and there ain't much chance of him getting out o' here with a sentry on guard."

"Please mind your own business, Sergeant Ball," rasped the Colonel sharply. "'Tis his own criminal folly that brought him here, and miscreants must take their punishment as it comes. I refuse to run any risks with him; so get you gone, Sergeant, and send word at once to the High Constable that one of the ruffians is free, so that he may take steps towards his recapture."

Without further comment the three men filed out of the loose-box, closing the door behind them. The captive heard a key grate harshly in the lock, and he was left alone to his thoughts and his galling bonds.

CHAPTER VII

TELLS HOW LORD ALVERFORD RECEIVES A MYSTERIOUS VISITOR

NED CARLESS breathed a sigh of thankfulness when, peeping cautiously from his hiding-place, he saw Colonel Oldfield disappear in the direction of the house. His stratagem had succeeded, but only by the merest chance.

On reaching the welcome shelter of the bushes he had been dismayed to find that, owing to the early season of the year and the consequent sparseness of their foliage, they afforded but little cover, and none in which he could expect to hide successfully. There were certainly plenty of boulders in the vicinity, but to take shelter behind one of them was simply to postpone recapture and not to elude it. He was in a desperate position, and one which was rendered the more unenviable by the Sergeant's skill as a marksman. Only Carless realized how narrowly those bullets had failed to wing him. The second had actually passed through the skirt of his riding-coat, and it was that which had caused him to drop as if hit, in the hope that, in his excitement, the Sergeant would neglect to reload.

He was further chagrined to find that, although his instinct had not erred when he opined that the stream would show him a way out of the garden, the little bridge under which it flowed into the Colonel's grounds was fully eighty yards distant. He could scarcely hope to cross safely the intervening space, for the ground was too rough and steep to permit of rapid progress, and he knew only too well that

the Sergeant's pistol was of heavier calibre and carried much further than the average weapon.

For a moment he despaired; and he had almost made up his mind to risk a desperate dash for the bridge when his keen eye discovered, about twenty yards away on his immediate right, a tiny hollow partly screened by a laurel bush. Without hesitation he ran swiftly to it, and found, to his delight, that it was much deeper than he had expected, and that by lying close in it he would be invisible to his pursuers unless they came within very close proximity to him.

He had scarce thrown himself into the hollow when the Colonel appeared in the identical place which he had just left, where he was joined almost immediately by Sergeant Ball. Carless thanked his stars that he had not attempted to reach the bridge, for, from where he lay, he could see how hopeless such an attempt would have been. The stream was too wide to jump, and apparently too difficult to ford on account of precipitous banks; and it took a winding course which he would have been compelled to follow, and which would have kept him within range sufficiently long to have enabled the Sergeant to retrieve his previous failures.

But, even as things were, his situation was by no means happy. He furtively watched his pursuers search the vicinity with a thoroughness that was born of their soldierly instincts. Once his heart nearly stood still as the Colonel approached to within five yards of where he lay. But the bush alone would not have concealed a child, and Carless had also counted on the fact that it stood isolated in the midst of open ground, in a line at right angles to that which he would naturally be expected to pursue. From his demeanor, the Colonel evidently thought it unlikely that the fugitive had taken this direction, for his step was slow and his eyes were less keen than usual; and after a casual glance at the bush he turned away and rejoined the Sergeant, who was still searching among the rocks.

At last, to Carless's intense relief, the search was abandoned. He chuckled to himself at the speech with which the Colonel discharged his unfortunate servant, every word of which reached his tense ears. He waited patiently until he heard the Colonel move away in the Sergeant's wake, and, raising his head carefully, watched the short, broad figure until it was out of sight. Then, without hesitation, he sprang to his feet and made for the bridge.

Here his task was easier than he had anticipated. He had fully expected that he would have to wade, perhaps swim, under the bridge to avoid scaling the high wall which enclosed the garden; but he found that several stones in one of the abutments of the bridge had been displaced, and he had no difficulty in climbing to the parapet and dropping on to the road. Here another pleasant surprise awaited him. Instead of the lane which he had expected he found himself on the main highway; so with a hasty glance round him to get his bearings he strode swiftly and without any attempt at concealment towards the north.

Carless's alert brain worked rapidly as he walked. He had no time to lose if he were to redeem his promise of rescue to Stephen. The High Constable was not likely to delay unduly his return for his prisoners, and prompt action was therefore imperative, for there would be little hope for Stephen if once he were safely lodged in gaol.

By the time he had covered a mile his plans began to take definite shape in his mind. Careful calculation made him time the High Constable's arrival at about eleven o'clock; and this would give him about two hours in which to make his preparations. Little enough for the purpose, but with luck it would serve.

Turning at length to the left off the highway, he traversed a pretty, winding lane that led to a small farmstead. The farmer himself was crossing the yard as Carless entered it, and he halted to view his visitor with quizzical eyes.

"In trouble again, eh, Ned?" he said, with a shrewd smile. "What's it this time?"

"I've just escaped from the clutches of the High Constable," replied Carless, smiling in his turn.

The farmer raised questioning eyebrows. "As bad as that, is it?" he said, more seriously. "I doubt you'll be hanged yet, lad."

"Maybe I shall, but it won't be this week," said Carless confidently. "But there's work to be done, Nick, and little time to lose. Have you got the key to the loft?"

"It's in th' usual place. Nobody's been in th' loft sin' you used it last. But what about the Constable's men? Are they after you?" asked Nicholas Merryweather, a note of anxiety creeping into his voice.

"Not yet, Nick. And you've no call to worry. They didn't recognize me last night, of that I'm certain. They wouldn't have left me if they had. I'll explain later. Is there a horse in the stables?"

"Aye, but there's nobbut th' bay mare, and I'd sooner you didn't take her."

"Why not?" queried Carless sharply.

"Well, her four white feet mak' her easy to tell, and everybody round here knows as she belongs to me."

Carless laughed his relief. "She won't have four white feet when I take her out of this yard," he said easily. "Leave that to me."

Merryweather sighed dubiously. "All right; have it your own way," he capitulated, turning towards the stable door. "Shall I saddle her?"

"Yes, please, Nick. And tell me, how soon can I reach the Gables from here?"

"Th' Gables?" echoed the farmer. "You surely don't mean Lord Alverford's place, do you now?"

"Of course I do," retorted Carless impatiently.

"By gum! but you beat cock-fighting, you do, Ned," marvelled Merryweather, eyeing the other with mystified

admiration. "It'll tak' you about ten minutes across country and a bit longer by road."

"Hum! Well, I'd better go by road. Boldness pays in this kind of situation. But I don't want to be seen when I leave here, so you had better send Joe up to the top of the lane and tell him to whistle when there's nobody in sight on the road. I'll be ready in ten minutes."

At the precise moment when Carless disappeared into the loft, Lord Alverford, pale and glum of countenance, entered the dining-room of the Gables to find his handsome, white-haired mother sitting in solitary state disposing of the last remnants of her breakfast. She frowned and pursed her lips when she saw him; and, having kissed her, he took his seat opposite her and resigned himself to receive the rating which he knew was coming.

"You are late again, Henry, abominably late," said Lady Alverford acidly. "Must you invariably disregard my wishes? Am I always to have my breakfast in solitude?"

"Ah, 'pon my word, I am sorry, mother; dooced sorry, ya know," replied her son. "I had a most confounded bad night, and I didn't sleep a wink till dawn."

"I am not surprised," she retorted. "'Twould, methinks, be more conducive to peaceful slumber if you sought your couch a little earlier. It passes my comprehension what you find hereabouts to keep you out till two o'clock of the morning."

The viscount flushed, and shifted uneasily in his chair. "Two o'clock!" he echoed. "Nay, surely, mother, 'twas scarce as bad as that. I——"

"Enough, sir!" said Lady Alverford peremptorily. "'Tis useless to deny it, for I, also unable to sleep on account of the storm, chanced to be at my window when you rode up the drive, and I saw you quite clearly. Might I presume so far as to ask where you had been?"

"I had been with Steve Burgoyne and Randolph Gorst," he answered readily, but with his eyes fixed on his plate.

"Ah! Then Mr. Burgoyne still lingers in the neighborhood," commented Lady Alverford. "What keeps him, pray?"

"Well, ya know, his horse is lame, as I told you before, mother."

"Bah! 'Tis not as lame as your explanation, I'll vow," she retorted tartly. "You must think me a fool, Henry! Are there, then, no other horses in Bolderburn that will carry Mr. Burgoyne?"

"Of course there are, but ya see, mother, Steve is plaguey fond of this particular anim——" She interrupted him impatiently.

"Enough, Henry! You weary me, and you do not deceive me one whit. I am sufficiently well acquainted with your friend to know that it would require something more than an ailing horse to keep him in an obscure Lancashire village."

"Quite so, mother. But, dooce take me, ya are forgetting that he is my greatest friend, and surely that is sufficient reason for him to linger awhile," protested Harry.

His mother regarded him sceptically. "It might be, but I beg leave to doubt it," she said, with unflattering directness. "And if it be for your sake that he lingers, why has he not called upon us here? I am vastly disappointed in him, Henry. Methought he had some little regard for me, and I confess that I have always liked him. Your friends are not usually to my taste, but I had little fault to find with Mr. Burgoyne until now."

"Nay, madam, ya wrong him, indeed ya do, b'jove," declared Harry eagerly. "'Tis my fault that he has not already paid his respects to ya, and last night he bade me tell ya that he would visit ya this very afternoon—er—that is, if—er—nothing occurred to prevent it, ya know," he concluded lamely, suddenly recollecting that he was quite in the dark as to what had happened to Stephen during last night's brush with the High Constable's men.

"And what can possibly occur to prevent it, pray?" asking Lady Alverford, raising her eyebrows. "Does Bolderburn boast so many attractions, then?"

But the embarrassed viscount was spared the necessity of replying immediately to these awkward questions by the entry of the butler, who desired to consult his mistress upon some problem connected with the household. The matter proved somewhat lengthy, and the grateful young nobleman made undue haste with his breakfast in the hope that he might discreetly disappear ere it was satisfactorily settled.

And good fortune abetted him. Even as Lady Alverford, having given the butler final instructions and dismissed him to his duties, prepared to resume her cross-examination, a footman entered the apartment with the announcement that a "person" was waiting in the hall who desired to see his lordship on most urgent and important business, and who would not be denied.

"What's his name?" queried Harry, gulping down his last mouthful with ill-concealed relief.

"He refused to give it, your lordship, and he is unknown to me," replied the lackey. "And I should not 'ave admitted 'im if 'e 'adn't said as the matter was vital and brooked no delay."

"All right. Show him into the library. I'll be there in a minute."

He rose to his feet as the door closed behind the footman, but his mother stayed him with a gesture.

"One more word, Henry, and then you may go to your mysterious visitor," she said. "I am quite well aware that your late home-coming last night was due to something much more serious than you would have me believe, for I have already been to the stables and there discovered that the horse you rode is wounded in the flank. But I have no wish to force your confidences. All I desire is your assurance that you are not engaged in some amorous

intrigue that will not bear the light of day," she concluded wistfully, and with an expression of anxiety in her eyes.

Harry laughed with sudden relief, and, stepping forward, kissed his mother lightly on the brow.

"Ya may set ya' mind at rest, madam," he said, in a tone that precluded all doubt as to the truth of his words. "In the whole district I don't know of one solitary woman, apart from ya'self and Averill, whom I'd look at twice, stap me if I do! What put the idea into ya' head?"

"Your horse's wound," she answered promptly. "Bolderburn is a peaceable place, and I hazarded a guess that the only person who would be likely to try to shoot you would be a jealous husband or an irate father."

"You are wide of the mark, mother," he laughed, striding towards the door. "The matter was of little moment, and I pray ya forget it."

He entered the library to find himself in the presence of a tall, well-built man who stood near the fireplace impatiently tapping his chin with the butt of his riding-whip. As the door opened, the man turned to the viscount a dark, sallow face lit by a pair of keen blue eyes—a face which might have been handsome but for its thick lips and the bluish tinge of the cheeks and chin that doubtless came from the constant shaving of a heavy black beard. In addition to these defects, Harry noted that the top lid of one of the blue eyes drooped in peculiar fashion, and that the man's clothes, though well cut, were worn and travel-stained.

"Ya wanted to see me, I believe," said Harry, eyeing his visitor somewhat askance. "Be seated, sir."

"I prefer to stand, if it's all the same to your lordship," said the other. "I must be on my way again at the earliest possible moment."

"Ya are in haste, then, my friend? Well, ya may go as soon as ya like. Burn me if I've any wish to keep ya,"

said his lordship indifferently, as he dropped languidly into a chair.

The stranger showed his white teeth in a flashing smile. "You are not enamored of my looks, eh? Well, I can't blame you, for neither am I. You do not by any chance know me, I suppose?"

"Never set eyes on ya in my life before that I know of. Who are ya?"

"That I cannot, at the moment, tell you. Little as you may like it, I must ask your lordship to take me on trust for the present. I hope that you are none the worse for your misadventure of yesternight."

Startled almost out of his wits, Harry sat bolt upright in his chair. "What the devil do you know of yesternight?" he cried, alarm in his voice.

"Everything. I will explain presently. But first I must ask you a question or two. Oh, 'tis no use your standing on your dignity," he said impatiently, as Harry frowned and stared at him haughtily. "'Twill be better for everybody, yourself included, if you answer my questions without parley. Lord Alverford, do you know what happened to Mr. Burgoyne after you galloped away from the fight?"

Haughtiness gave place to anxiety in his lordship's eyes. "No, damme if I do!" he said uneasily. "Somebody fired a pistol, and the bullet grazed my horse, and he set off across country as though the devil were after him. I couldn't pull him up, and he eventually stumbled and threw me. It took me a dooce of a time to catch the brute in that infernal darkness; and by the time I got back to the scene of action everything was quiet as the grave, and there was not a soul to be seen. So I ventured to hope that my friends had got away, and as there was nothing I could do I went home, b'jove."

"Perhaps your lordship will be surprised to know that I fired that shot," said the other smiling.

"Did ya, agad?" ejaculated Harry. "Did ya intend to wing me, then?"

"No. I intended to startle your horse, so that he might carry you out of danger, and I was successful beyond my hopes."

"But why did ya want me out of the way?" asked the mystified viscount.

"To save you from being taken prisoner, as Mr. Burgoyne was."

"What!" shouted Harry, springing to his feet in a panic. "Steve a prisoner! What are ya saying, man?"

"'Tis only too true, unfortunately. I left him but an hour ago lying in Colonel Oldfield's summer-house, awaiting the arrival of the High Constable to take him to gaol."

"Oh, gad, what a dooce of a mess!" breathed Harry, his face a picture of dismay. "And is Sir Randolph there, too?"

"No. Sir Randolph played you false." And, in as few words as possible, Carless repeated the story which he had recently related to Stephen, omitting, however, to divulge his own name, but concluding his narrative with a brief description of his escape from the summer-house.

"'Pon my soul and honor, 'tis the most fantastic tale I ever heard," declared Harry, shaking a doleful head.

"Aye, 'tis fantastic, but 'tis nevertheless true. And it behoves us to act quickly if we are to aid Mr. Burgoyne. I have promised to contrive his escape, and I have little doubt that I can redeem my promise. But it must be done prior to his being lodged in gaol. Once in Darnchester he will be beyond my reach. Are you willing to act with me in this, Lord Alverford? The task is delicate, not to say dangerous, and I would have you think twice before committing yourself."

"No need to think, man," cried Harry, his heart bounding within him at the prospect of another frolic. "I don't

know who ya are, but ya may count on me to the limit, b'gad."

"Good," said Carless, smiling his satisfaction. "You may be ill-pleased with the part I wish you to play, but 'tis a vastly important one, and it must be handled with skill and diplomacy if we are to be completely successful. I want you to go at once and call upon Colonel Oldfield. Tell——"

"Can't be done, sir," interrupted Harry, shaking his head. "He has promised to shoot me on sight if he catches me within his gates again."

Carless made a gesture of impatience. "Your call will be formal, sir, and even Colonel Oldfield cannot show violence to a formal visitor. For that reason you will go in your carriage. Make what excuse you like for your call. Maybe your best plan would be to say that Lady Alverford has heard of the Colonel's adventure, and desires to be assured that he and his niece are none the worse for their unpleasant experience."

"'Tis a bright idea," declared Harry more hopefully. "Methinks 'twill serve. And what then? Surely there is more to my part than that?"

"There is. You must, by hook or crook, contrive to see the prisoner, and to see him in the presence of either Lady Averill or the Colonel—preferably the former. If you can contrive that they both accompany you when you visit him, so much the better."

"But surely that will be to defeat my own purpose," objected Harry. "I can't even give him a message if others are present, now can I?"

"I do not propose to send him a message."

"Then what the dooce must I see him for? 'Twill be most cursed embarrassing for us both, ya know."

"Doubtless it will, and maybe 'twill put you in a false position for the nonce in Mr. Burgoyne's eyes. But that cannot be helped. For 'tis not only Mr. Burgoyne's escape

that we have to consider. We must so contrive things that once he is free no suspicion will attach to his name."

"Agad! methinks that will be plaguey difficult. They must already be fully aware of his identity. Even if he weren't recognized, that pestilent traitor Gorst will have given him away."

"I doubt it; in fact, I am certain he will have done no such thing," said Carless confidently. "Sir Randolph's position in this affair is a precarious one, and he must perforce step warily. Hence I am sure that he would be too astute to breathe Mr. Burgoyne's name last night. He is hoping that his prisoner will be recognized by another, and then he will merely confirm that recognition whilst showing profound astonishment at the discovery."

"Sounds feasible enough, and all of a piece with the rest of his villainy," mused Harry. "And ya don't think anyone else has spotted Steve yet?"

"I don't. He was in a most dishevelled condition when I left him, and his face and clothes are covered with grime. Only someone who is intimately acquainted with him would be likely to identify Buck Burgoyne in such a state, and I understand that he is not well known in this neighborhood."

"No. He is practically a stranger."

"Well, we have no time to discuss the matter further. We are compelled to take some risks. So I will proceed. 'Tis well known that Mr. Burgoyne and you are intimate friends. Thus, if when you see the prisoner you discover him a complete stranger, it will be difficult for anyone to gainsay you. And that is what you will do."

"But suppose Steve gives the game away. He doesn't expect me, does he?"

"No. However, we must trust to his wit in the matter, and I do not think he will disappoint us. And you must be on the scene ahead of Sir Randolph. I surmise that he will almost certainly wait for the High Constable before

he puts in an appearance, otherwise he might find himself plyed with questions that would be difficult to answer. Colonel Oldfield is no fool, and the circumstances of the case must seem mighty strange to a soldier."

"And is that all I have to do?" asked Harry, looking woefully disappointed.

"That is the most important part of your work, but, in addition, I want you to use every means in your power to delay the High Constable's departure with his prisoner."

"At what time does Colonel Oldfield expect him?"

"That I cannot say, but I hazard that 'twill be between eleven and twelve. But whatever time it may be, you must remain until he has been and gone."

"Now perish me if it isn't a most uncongenial task you are giving me, sir," cried Harry petulantly. "Couldn't ya find me something easier, something which doesn't need such a plaguey lot of thought, what? I'll wager I make an incontinent mess of this, for I am no diplomat —in fact, most folks consider me totally brainless. b'jove."

"So much the better that they do," declared Carless promptly. "But I know more about you than you think, Lord Alverford, and I am fully aware that they are vastly mistaken."

"Ya flatter me, sir, 'pon my soul and honor ya do," said Harry, a twinkle in his eye.

"You'll do as I wish, then?"

"I suppose I'll have to," said Harry, with a sigh of resignation.

"Good. Then the sooner you set out the better," said Carless, preparing to depart.

"But what are ya going to do ya'self?" asked Harry. "Am I to be kept in the dark as to ya' plans?"

"I think it better so."

"Why? Don't ya trust me?" queried Harry sharply.

"Implicitly," replied Carless simply. "I shouldn't be asking your aid otherwise. But my plans are only half

formulated, and I may have to vary them to suit the circumstances. Such variation, if you were unaware of it, would only cause you unnecessary worry, and you will need all your wits for your own task. However, if things turn out successfully, I promise to communicate with you with all possible speed."

"One moment, sir, ere ya depart. Are ya not taking grave risks in riding boldly about the countryside without attempt at concealment? You may be sure that the hunt is up after ya."

"Not a doubt of it," smiled Carless. "But the High Constable's men seek a fair-haired, fresh-complexioned fellow with a black eye—for such was the man they captured —whilst I am a swarthy, blue-chinned ruffian. The black eye gave me most trouble to rid, and even yet the lids are inclined to close; but I think 'twill serve."

"But ya' clothes! Won't those betray ya?"

"I think not. They compare very unfavorably with the modish garments which the escaped prisoner chanced to be wearing."

"Agad! sir, methinks ya are something of a mystery," opined Harry, regarding Carless with admiring eyes.

"So others have thought before you, your lordship," returned Carless enigmatically, as he bowed and hastened from the room.

CHAPTER VIII

WHEREIN LADY AVERILL DEFIES THE COLONEL AND BEFRIENDS STEPHEN

FOR nearly an hour Stephen lay in torment of mind and body. His head throbbed, every muscle in his cramped frame ached, the cords round his wrists cut like knives into his swollen flesh, and he was faint with hunger. He pictured himself confined for interminable weeks in a dank and stinking gaol awaiting trial; he saw himself standing in the felons' dock, shrinking before the merciless eyes of the judge; his morbid fancy even painted a picture of a gallows upon which he stood with a rope round his neck expecting to be hurled into eternity.

Consequently it was with a feeling akin to gladness that he heard footsteps and voices which told of somebody's approach to his prison-house. He was prepared to welcome anything that might give him respite from his thoughts, for, despite Carless's promise of rescue, he had abandoned hope when Colonel Oldfield had thought fit to have him moved from the summer-house to the loose-box.

But it was evident that his taciturn warder did not share his pleasure in the arrival of visitors, for there ensued an altercation outside the locked door, every word of which was perfectly audible to him.

"I can't let you in, mum," growled Dixon's rough voice. "The Colonel said as nobody must see th' prisoner wi'out his orders."

"The Colonel's orders do not apply to me, Dixon," came in haughty feminine tones. "Open the door at once."

"Can't be done, mum. It's too risky," declared Dixon stubbornly.

"Open it, I say!" Stephen heard the angry stamp of a small foot on the cobblestones of the yard. "You are absolutely inhuman, all of you. Your prisoner may be a scoundrel, but that is no excuse for starving him to death. Food he must and shall have, so please argue no further."

"But the Colonel——"

"Enough, sir; I will be responsible to the Colonel."

The peremptory tones brooked no denial, and the door was grudgingly opened to admit Lady Averill Stapleton. She was accompanied by the Sergeant, who carried in his two hands a tray laden with a dainty selection of viands and a huge pot of fragrant coffee. Stephen looked up at her with eyes that showed a strange mixture of gratitude and shame, and he felt the blood rise slowly in his face as she steadfastly returned his gaze.

"Put down your tray, Sergeant," she said briskly. "And untie the man's hands."

"Daren't do no such thing, miss, askin' your pardon," returned the Sergeant, placing the tray on the floor and then standing stiffly to attention.

"Please don't be ridiculous, Sergeant Ball," snapped Averill. "How is the poor man to eat if his hands are bound?"

"I reckon as I'll have to feed him, miss."

"Nonsense! If you don't untie him I shall do so myself," she declared.

"But suppose he makes a dash for it; what then?" protested the Sergeant despairingly.

Impatiently Averill turned to Stephen. "If we relieve you of your bonds, will you give me your word that you will make no attempt to escape as long as we remain with you?" she asked.

"Gladly, madam," replied Stephen fervently.

"Does that satisfy you, Sergeant?" queried Averill.

"Aye, it satisfies me, miss—as long as the Colonel doesn't come and catch us," returned the Sergeant, with an apprehensive glance behind him.

"Leave the Colonel to me. And be quick, Sergeant. The coffee will be growing cold."

Abandoning his qualms, the Sergeant, not without considerable difficulty, contrived to release the cruel cords that bound the prisoner's wrists, and Stephen almost fainted with pain as the blood began to flow freely again beneath the lacerated skin. The eyes of both his visitors were quick to note his distress, and Averill exclaimed indignantly.

"The brutes!" she cried, her face aglow with compassionate anger. "How dared they tie him so dreadfully tight? Look, Sergeant; the cords have bitten into the flesh until it bleeds. Were you responsible for this?"

"Not I miss," disclaimed the Sergeant hastily.

"Then who was?" she demanded, going down on her knees at Stephen's side and gently taking his hands in hers so that she might more closely examine his wrists.

The Sergeant scratched his head. "Well, miss, it was the High Constable's men as did it, but it was Sir Randolph Gorst as ordered it to be done," he explained, somewhat reluctantly. "He wasn't satisfied with it the first time, and made 'em do it over again."

"But if he were so particular, how did the other man escape so easily?" she asked, as, taking a jug of hot water from the tray, she poured some of its contents into a basin, and, ignoring Stephen's protests, with her own tiny handkerchief began to bathe his wrists.

"Oh, he didn't bother about the other fellow, miss, only this one," said the Sergeant.

"Why was that?" she queried sharply, looking up from her task.

"Couldn't say, miss, unless it was that he thought one of 'em more important than t'other."

"Can you explain it, sir?" she asked, addressing herself to Stephen.

"I am afraid I cannot," replied Stephen, to whom the Sergeant's replies had been decidedly illuminating.

"Hum! I wonder," said Averill sceptically. "However, Sir Randolph shall explain it himself, and I'll warrant the explanation will afford him little satisfaction. I suppose 'tis of no use my asking you who you are."

"If you will pardon me, madam, not the slightest," replied Stephen, smiling.

"I thought not," said she, smiling in turn. "Still, perhaps you will tell me if you practice highway robbery as a means of livelihood."

Again the hot flush of shame mounted in Stephen's grimy cheeks. "I do not, madam," he said quickly, and with more indignation than his situation justified. "You may not believe me, but last night was the only occasion upon which I have appeared in the guise of a highwayman."

"But I do believe you," said Averill calmly.

Both Stephen and the Sergeant stared at her in undisguised astonishment.

"You—you believe me?" stammered Stephen.

"I do," she said firmly.

"But why should you?" he asked. "Was I then so unbusinesslike in my methods that I advertised myself an amateur?"

Averill laughed. "I' faith, no! Your methods accorded precisely with what I imagine to be those of the highly experienced professional. But I believe you for the same reason that I took your word that you would make no attempt to escape during the time that I remained with you," she said enigmatically.

"And that reason is——?"

"A woman's reason, sir, and therefore not to be divulged," she said promptly. "Has the numbness gone from your hands?"

"Thanks to your ministrations, madam, yes," said Stephen gratefully.

"Then proceed with your breakfast. Sergeant, place the tray a little nearer."

The Sergeant obeyed, and as he did so Stephen looked up at Averill with a quizzical smile.

"Madam, your infinite charity makes me bold, and I venture to trespass on it," he said. "Might I beg that my legs also be unbound?"

"Certainly," she said, without hesitation. "Sergeant, undo that rope."

"Good lord! miss, but I'll be hung, drawn, and quartered for this if the Colonel comes," murmured the Sergeant, nevertheless kneeling down to the task.

"You make me eternally your debtor, Lady Averill," said Stephen fervently, as he fell to on the viands that were spread on the tray before him.

She gave him a sharp and searching glance. "You know me then, sir?" she said questioningly.

"Nay, madam. I had but seen you once prior to last night."

"And when was that, pray?" she asked, with apparent indifference, but watching him narrowly from under her long lashes.

"Two days ago," he said unguardedly, forgetful of everything but the charm of his companion and the excellence of the breakfast with which she had provided him.

"Where?" The abrupt question awoke his slumbering prudence, and he gazed at her with eyes turned suddenly grave ere he answered.

"I regret that I am unable to tell you, madam," he said slowly. "'Twould be indiscreet in me to do so."

"Doubtless it would," she agreed, with corresponding gravity, yet with a twinkle in her eyes which Stephen failed to observe. "I will not press the point. But I perceive

that your forehead is cut; I had not noticed it before. Is it painful?"

"The cut itself is naught, but it has made my head ache most infernally," he answered, with a rueful smile.

"Ah, then I will bathe it for you," she said promptly. "It may ease it a little."

But Stephen drew back sharply as she picked up the basin of water in which her saturated handkerchief remained. He had not forgotten his late companion's remarks about the coating of grime and blood that his face had acquired, and he knew that if it were removed his last vestige of disguise would be gone. At all costs he must contrive to remain unwashed until Averill had taken her departure—although he realized that she was not the type of woman to be lightly turned from any purpose to which she had set her mind, and it was probable that refusal of her kindly ministrations would make him appear churlish in her eyes, but that he would have to risk.

"Your pardon, madam, but I would prefer it to remain as it is," he said hurriedly. "I fear bathing might make it bleed afresh, and that would necessitate a bandage; and I have no desire to attract any more attention than is necessary on my journey to gaol."

"I understand," said Averill slowly, showing in her manner no trace of the offended dignity which Stephen had anticipated. "Methinks you are a wise man."

"Wise!" echoed Stephen. "Say rather a fool to be in such straits."

"You speak bitterly, my friend."

"And with good cause. Yet I suppose I have only myself to blame," he said gloomily.

"Nay, look not so glum. Surely all it not lost."

"I' faith! madam, 'tis as near lost as makes no matter," he returned. "An hour or two more and the prison gates will close behind me, and there will be small hope for me then."

" 'While there's life there's hope' remember that. 'Tis an old adage, but a comforting one. And you are not in prison yet."

Gently she rallied him from the gloom into which he had sunk, and by the time his breakfast was over he was laughing gaily and unaffectedly.

Observing that he had finished his meal, she was about to give orders to the Sergeant for the removal of the tray when to her ears came the growing sound of voices raised in argument, which warned her that her uncle was about to pay his prisoner another visit. Sergeant Ball had also heard them, and he sent in her direction an imploring and apprehensive glance.

"Stand your ground, Sergeant," she said quietly, answering his unspoken question. " 'Tis too late to do anything, but you need have no fear. I will arrange matters."

"If it will help at all you can wrap the cords round me again, and I will pretend that I am still bound," said Stephen hastily. "Colonel Oldfield will doubtless fail to notice that there is anything wrong."

"Good idea," said the Sergeant eagerly, picking up a cord and stepping forward quickly.

But Averill waved him away, and turning her lovely face to Stephen, she rewarded him with a dazzling smile that made his heart thump like a hammer.

"Your wits are quick, sir, but the precaution is unnecessary, as you shall see," she said calmly.

The voices of the two men who had now entered the stable yard, but who were as yet invisible to their auditors, presented a contrast so irresistibly comical that it brought a smile to the lips of even the uneasy Sergeant. One was so loud and blustering that it almost reached a shout, whilst the other was mild and gentle as a woman's.

To Stephen the latter brought complete astonishment not unmixed with hope—astonishment that Alverford

should have discovered his prison and had the temerity to visit him, and hope that his visit was not without purpose.

"But I positively must see him, Colonel," Harry was saying. "Ya have no right to refuse me, pink me and perish me if ya have! 'Tis ya' duty to let me see him, for I might know him, b'jove."

"Duty be damned!" retorted the Colonel rudely. "I know my duty, young man, without any instruction from you. I told you I'd shoot you if ever you came here again, ye young dog, so you come first thing in the morning when I'm not expecting you, damn you."

"Nay, come now, Colonel, ya wrong me, ya do indeed," protested Harry, in languid tones. "My mother insisted on my coming as soon as she heard the news."

"Tchah! A fine lot o' notice ye'd have taken of your mother if you hadn't thought you'd catch a glimpse of Averill, I'll be bound. You have the devil's own effrontery."

At this instant the Colonel reached the door of the loose-box, which, in the heat of his argument with Harry, he had hitherto failed to notice was wide open. Instantly he stopped dead in his tracks, and stood like one petrified with amazement and anger. His eyes bulged, his face colored until it was well-nigh purple, and the blue veins in his forehead stood out like whipcord.

"What the devil is the meaning of this?" he yelled, when at last he had recovered his powers of speech.

"Methinks its meaning is obvious, uncle," returned Averill calmly. "I am giving this poor fellow his breakfast."

"Breakfast! Breakfast! Ham and toast, coffee and pigeon pie, fresh fruit and scones. Breakfast, madam! Gad's blades, you astonish me! 'Tis a damned banquet, and you are giving it to a dirty, thieving rascal who tried to abduct you. Dixon, you disobedient dog, did I not tell——"

"Please address your remarks to me, uncle, and not to Dixon," interrupted Averill. "I alone am responsible for everything."

"Indeed now, madam, 'tis kind of you to acquaint me with the fact," said the Colonel, with a none-too-successful attempt at sarcasm. "And was it you who unbound this miscreant's limbs—or was it Sergeant Ball?" he snapped suddenly, turning baleful eyes on the Sergeant.

" 'Twas Sergeant Ball," replied Averill, heedless of the soldier's reproachful look.

"Ah! I thought as much," said the Colonel, breathing heavily. "So 'twas you, you traitorous villain, you ungrateful vagabond. By Jupiter! I'll have you——"

"Yes, it was Sergeant Ball, acting under my orders," pursued Averill serenely.

"Your orders, eh, madam?" choked the Colonel. "Confound you and your orders! There is only one person who has a right to give orders here, and that is myself. Myself, madam, d'ye hear?"

"Perfectly, uncle. Your voice carries passing well, although perhaps you are a trifle inarticulate. But you forget that the Sergeant left your service an hour or so ago and entered mine. Hence he takes his orders from me, sir."

"And by what right do you give him orders to interfere with my prisoner? Answer me that, madam!" blustered the Colonel, but with less assurance.

"By the right of common humanity, sir," retorted Averill. "No man starves if I can prevent it, be he sinner or saint. Come, uncle, you are unreasonable. What harm have I done?" she asked, in softer tones.

"None, as it chances," he replied, somewhat mollified. "That, however, is not the point. He might have attempted to make a dash for it, like the other fellow did, and I fancy he would have had a fair chance of getting past Dixon

and the Sergeant, for he is a sizable rogue, and handy enough with his mauleys by the look of him."

"There was never any possibility of his making such an attempt," she said quietly.

"Indeed! And why not?"

"Because he had given me his word not to do so as long as I remained here."

"Oh! He gave you his word, did he, the rascal? Ha! Hum! Gave you his word. And what's the word of a night-riding thief worth, eh, madam?"

"Naught, as a rule. Yet I think this man's word is worth as much as—as—well, shall we say yours, uncle?" she replied sweetly.

"By Jupiter! madam, you flatter me," cried the Colonel, with heavy sarcasm.

"Would you not have taken his word, uncle?" she snapped suddenly.

But before the Colonel could reply, Harry, who had stood in acute discomfort during the colloquy, indiscreetly stepped into the breach.

"'Pon my soul and honor, sir, Averill's right, b'jove," he said. "Just take a look at the fellow. He's most cursed dirty, of course, but he's honest; ya can tell it by his eyes."

"Honest, you fool!" roared the Colonel, glaring at the viscount. "Do honest men hold up carriages and abduct women? Tchah!"

"No, no; of course not," replied Harry hastily. "But what I mean was that——"

"I don't care a tiny damn what you meant! And I don't need your interference, either, you busybody. What are you doing here, anyway?"

"Why, surely, Colonel, ya are forgetting that I came with ya to see if I could give ya a clue to ya' prisoner's identity, what?" said Harry mendaciously.

"'Twas kind of you," declared the Colonel satirically.

"Well, here he is; take a good look at him. D'ye know him?"

Harry stared down at Stephen with languid eyes which betrayed nothing beyond the mild curiosity of a complete stranger; and as he met their steady, unwavering regard Stephen began to revise his estimate of his friend's wit, which had hitherto been of none too flattering a character.

"Are you going to stand gaping there all day?" cried the Colonel irritably, as Harry made no immediate reply to his question. "Do you know him or don't you?"

"Never set eyes on him in my life before." Harry lied with an air of careless boredom which was entirely convincing to most of those present.

"Of course you didn't, you ninny," said the Colonel contemptuously. "I could have told you that without your coming here poking your ugly nose into matters which don't concern you. You are too nice, too pretty, too much of a damned nincompoop to be acquainted with aught so low or so bold as a cutpurse, my lord."

A slow flush started to dye the young man's cheeks, and he quivered perceptibly under the lash of Colonel Oldfield's tongue, but before he could reply a radiant figure broke into the midst of the group and flung a pair of eager arms round Averill's neck. Harry fell back a pace, and, his anger forgotten, gazed in admiration at the laughing face that was held up to receive Averill's kiss.

"Good morning, everybody. How dare you leave me to breakfast alone, Colonel?" cried the newcomer gaily, but with her wonderful grey eyes fixed on Harry—to that young man's manifest confusion and secret delight. "Why all so solemn on such a beautiful day? And what do you here? Is't an inquest or something, Colonel?" Her questions came one on top of another; and when at length she stopped for an answer she shook her jet black curls at Harry, and, turning suddenly, seized the Colonel round the neck and

kissed him full on his angry mouth. She did not appear to notice Stephen, who sat watching the group with some amusement.

"No, 'tis not an inquest, Sylvia," laughed Averill, answering for the Colonel, whose face showed all the symptoms of a violent inward struggle between his rage at Harry's pertinacity and his pleasure in Sylvia's arrival. "I have just been giving this poor fellow his breakfast."

"La! is this one of those desperate men who held us up last night?" cried Sylvia, taking a step towards Stephen, and gazing at him in mock affright but with eyes dancing. "How could you do it, sir? Two poor unprotected women. For shame, sir!"

"Nay, nay, Sylvia, not unprotected, surely," protested the Colonel. "You are forgetting me, aren't you?"

"How could I forget anyone so gallant, sir?" she asked, with an archness that made the old man positively beam with pride and importance. "But I'll wager this dreadful ruffian thought we were unprotected. Confess, sir. Isn't that what you thought?"

"Indeed, no, madam. I knew Colonel Oldfield was there, but I was unaware until this moment that the Lady Averill had another travelling companion of her own sex —though I must have been blind to overlook one so charming," answered Stephen, the twinkle in his eyes matching hers.

"Fie, sir! you mustn't pay me compliments," she chided him, pursing her lips. "I took good care you didn't see me. I made myself as small as ever I could, and hid behind the Colonel. But suppose you had known that I was there. Would you have tried to carry me off as well as Averill?"

Stephen laughed. "I' faith, madam, I could scarce have managed two of you—but I doubt not that one of my friends would have been only too willing to essay the task,"

he added, with a sudden glance at Harry which made that young man blush most unaccountably.

Sylvia clapped her hands. "How delightfully romantic!" she cried ecstatically. "And what would you have done with us when——"

But here Colonel Oldfield thought it time to interfere. "Come, come, Sylvia, you must not bandy words with this fellow," he said importantly.

"But I like him," objected Sylvia, with a pout.

"Like him!" ejaculated the astonished Colonel. "You like him—a dirty rogue like that? Gad's blades! what are women coming to? Apparently Averill likes him, too, judging by the amount of good food she's wasted on him—not to mention Lord Alverford, who has ventured the fool opinion that he looks honest!"

Sylvia turned to Harry, and dropped him a courtsey. "Are you Lord Alverford, then?" she queried, with a demureness that was belied by her roguish glance.

"I—er—well, of course—er—yes, I am," said Harry lamely.

"Forgive me, both of you," interposed Averill penitently. "I had forgot, in the confusion of the moment, that you were not already acquainted. Viscount Alverford—Miss Sylvia Ravenscourt. Sylvia is come to stay with us for some weeks, Harry, so you will doubtless meet often. Harry is a very old friend of mine, Sylvia."

"Tchah! Friend, did ye say?" growled her uncle. "Lapdog would be nearer the mark."

Stephen, in the rôle of unwilling spectator, observed that when Averill spoke of Harry as an old friend a quick shadow darkened Sylvia's charming face, and that she submitted Averill to a sharp scrutiny from under her dark lashes. But she was evidently reassured by what she saw, for she turned to Harry with a radiant smile, and said:

"I shall hope to be admitted to your friendship also, sir. And I would have the Colonel know that I am very

fond of dogs—yes, and bears, too," she added, with a delicious *moue* at the Colonel. "But I am forgetting. Sir Randolph Gorst has arrived, and is consumed with a fever to see Averill."

Colonel Oldfield raised his eyebrows. "And what the deuce does he want to see Averill about, eh?" he asked.

"Indeed, sir, and I do not know; I did not ask him," she answered meekly. "Doubtless he seeks a cure for the megrims, or maybe he desires her to match a ribbon for him."

"Humph!" The Colonel suspected that she was laughing at him, but her eyes were veiled and her demure face betrayed nothing. "I expect he has come to see after the prisoners—er—that is, prisoner. 'Tis me he wants to see, not Averill. Let us return to the house. Good day to you, Alverford; we shall not require your valuable services further."

"Oh! but you mustn't send Lord Alverford away like that," cried Sylvia, clasping her two hands round the Colonel's arm and turning a pleading face to his. "I have heard so much about him, and have such a lot of questions to ask him. And I want him to teach me to throw a fly—unless he has something better to do. Averill tells me he is a wonderful fisherman."

"I—er—I am—er—entirely at ya' service, now and at all times, Miss Ravenscourt," declared the enchanted Harry. "But—er—I haven't got a rod with me, b'jove."

"Poof! That does not matter," she cried airily. "When he has got rid of Sir Randolph Gorst and his poor prisoner, Colonel Oldfield will lend you one, won't you, Colonel?"

The Colonel blasphemed under his breath. "All right. Have it your own way, miss," he grunted. "Sergeant, tie up that vagabond again. And you, Dixon, see that the Sergeant does it properly. And don't leave him, either of you, until he is safe in the High Constable's hands."

He turned away towards the house, with Sylvia still

clinging to his arm and Harry following in their wake. But Averill lingered.

"Remember that your promise no longer holds, sir," she said in a clear voice to Stephen. "As soon as I am gone you may do as you please, even though I should chance to return."

"What's that, madam?" called the Colonel sharply, stopping short and turning on his heel. "Are you inciting the prisoner to escape? If so, you may spare your breath, for there's no freedom for him this side of Darnchester gaol, let me tell you."

Averill made no reply, but ere she departed she favored Stephen with a smile that made him momentarily indifferent to the bonds which the Sergeant was industriously replacing.

CHAPTER IX

IN WHICH SIR RANDOLPH SHOWS HIS HAND MORE PLAINLY THAN IS WISE

"I SHOULD be lacking in frankness, Colonel, if I refrained from telling you that I view the escape of this prisoner as a very serious matter."

Having delivered himself of this unctuous statement, Sir Randolph leaned back in his chair with a virtuous expression on his face which accorded ill with his reputation. Mr. Crisp, the High Constable, a pursy, sycophantic little man who obviously regarded the baronet as a very important personage indeed, nodded his agreement, and did his best to assume an expression which would convince Colonel Oldfield, who chanced to be a justice of the peace, that here was an official zealous to a fault in his devotion to his duties.

But the Colonel, to whose nerves the events of the morning had been more than a little trying, was not in the mood to be called to task.

"I don't care a damn for your views, Sir Randolph," he said curtly. "I'd have you know that I am a soldier, not a gaoler."

"Quite so, sir, quite so," interposed Mr. Crisp fussily. "But you forget, sir, that the prisoners were left in your charge, and——"

"I forget nothing, sir," snapped the Colonel. "By whose orders were they locked up in my summer-house, yours or mine? Answer me that."

"Mine, sir, mine, of course. But——"

"But nothing, sir. 'Twas a piece of damned impertinence on your part to foist your confounded prisoners on to me, and heaven knows why I consented to such an arrangement. But I should like to know for what purpose you left them here. What was your object, eh?"

"There was no object other than safety, Colonel Oldfield," replied the High Constable, somewhat puzzled by the question. "The night was very wild and dark, and we were a long way from Darnchester, and Sir Randolph thought it wiser——"

"And what the devil had Sir Randolph to do with it?" asked the Colonel sharply. "Do you take your instructions from him, pray?"

"No, certainly not," said Mr. Crisp hastily, beginning to feel decidedly bewildered by the Colonel's unexpected antagonism. "But, as I said, the night was dark——"

"Tchah! Spare me such fool explanations. Why, man, you had enough men with you to ensure the safety of a dozen prisoners, let alone two. Have you no better explanation to offer, Sir Randolph?"

"None, sir," said the baronet, with an assumption of easy nonchalance. "At night one is apt to take precautions which, examined by the cold light of day, appear to be a trifle elaborate."

"By Jupiter! yours were elaborate, anyway," scoffed the Colonel. "I have raided the enemy's lines with fewer men than you had at your command—aye, and raided them successfully, too. However, I tell you flatly, sir, that I believe you are deliberately deceiving me as to the true motive for your action. And, furthermore, I don't see how you came to be mixed up in the matter at all, Gorst."

Sir Randolph stared at the Colonel with eyes full of reproachful astonishment. "Methought I explained that last night," he said, rather stiffly. "'Twas my good fortune to get wind of the plot to abduct your niece and to be able to frustrate it. That my methods of doing so do not meet

with your approval is unfortunate, sir, but I should have thought that you would at least have been a little grateful for my action."

"So I am," declared the Colonel ungraciously; "but that's not the point. I can't understand why you were in command, instead of Crisp."

"That's our business," said Sir Randolph curtly. Then, tardily remembering that it was not politic for him to antagonize Averill's guardian, he continued: "But perhaps the thing does appear strange, after all. You see, sir, Crisp thought that, as I was in possession of the facts at first hand, it would be better if I took control until we had laid the ruffians by the heels. That was all."

"Humph!" grunted the Colonel, with undisguised scepticism. "Well, all I can say is that you were not too successful as a leader, sir."

"Not successful!" exclaimed the baronet. "You amaze me, sir! We rescued you from your predicament and took two of your assailants captive. What more do you want?"

"You let one of 'em get clear," persisted the Colonel obstinately. "And, what's more, you tied up another of 'em so badly that he managed to free himself, and if it hadn't been for my timely arrival he'd have released his companion, too. Is that your idea of success, Sir Randolph?"

But Gorst was by this time inwardly boiling with rage, and, fearful lest his anger should get the better of him, he made no reply. He had been intensely mortified to learn, on his arrival at the Colonel's house, that one of the prisoners had escaped. This might, and probably would, prove disastrous to his plans, and he was consumed with impatience to find out which of the twain had got away.

Miss Ravenscourt, who had been the first person he had met in the house, could tell him nothing; and the Colonel, when he at last appeared, declared that he "didn't know t'other from which," and that he could not see that it

made any difference which of the two remained in durance. So Gorst had been compelled to dissemble his burning curiosity as best he might, and to await the coming of the High Constable with what patience he could command.

Mr. Crisp emptied his wineglass and rose to his feet.

"With your permission, sir, 'tis time to depart," he said, with a bow. "I must get this miscreant behind bolts and bars without further delay."

"Aye, methinks 'twould be best," agreed the Colonel drily. "My house was not built to accommodate gaol-birds. If you will follow me I'll show you where he is lodged."

He led the way to the loose-box, followed by Mr. Crisp and Sir Randolph. The High Constable's men, six in number, had dismounted, and, having made short work of the foaming ale with which the Colonel's hospitality had provided them, they were now lounging about in the vicinity of their horses.

"You haven't got too many men, Crisp," grumbled Sir Randolph in an undertone, eyeing the group with a scowl.

"More than enough, Sir Randolph, particularly now that we have only one prisoner," said the High Constable airily. Truth to tell, Mr. Crisp had been torn between his desire to show himself a hardy fellow in the eyes of the Colonel and a prudent one in those of Sir Randolph. So, like most men of his type, he had compromised, and brought with him six men; but these had been carefully chosen for their task, and a more villainous-looking set it would have been hard to find. They looked infinitely more like law-breakers than pillars of the State, and their sinister appearance somewhat consoled Sir Randolph for what he considered their lack of numbers.

"There you are, gentlemen," said the Colonel, as Dixon opened the door of the loose-box and revealed Stephen reclining on a pile of hay. "The sooner you relieve me of my charge the better I shall be pleased."

The High Constable stepped forward importantly and began to issue his orders. "Henderson, release his legs but leave his arms bound. Now stand up, you"—this to Stephen—"and look sharp about it. You'll move a bit quicker, my man, before I've done with you. Outside with you."

Stephen strode into the yard, and, stopping in front of Sir Randolph, whose satisfaction that he was not the man who had escaped showed plain in his face, stood regarding him with eyes so baleful that the baronet involuntarily recoiled a pace. But he quickly recovered himself, and, turning to Mr. Crisp, said sharply: "Those cords want seeing to, or he'll have 'em loose ere you get to Darnchester. Here, you," he called to one of the men; "bind his wrists afresh, and bind 'em tight."

"You scum!" said Stephen, under his breath. "You filthy scum!"

White with sudden rage—rage made more fierce by his consciousness of the ignoble part he played—Sir Randolph raised the heavy riding-whip which he carried and struck with all his force at Stephen. But the latter, half anticipating the blow, twisted suddenly, with the result that, although the lash wound round his shoulders, it caused him little discomfort.

"Perhaps that'll teach you to keep a civil tongue in your head, you insolent hound," snarled Gorst, only restrained from a second blow by the contempt which he saw in Colonel Oldfield's face. "Get him away, Crisp, lest one of the ladies should appear and he should insult her as he insulted me."

"Where's that spare horse, Kellett?" shouted the officious Mr. Crisp.

The man addressed led forward the mare which Stephen had ridden yesternight and curtly ordered him to mount. But, trussed as he was, this was no easy task. He looked expectantly at Kellett, but as that individual offered him

no help he contrived to get his left foot into the stirrup unaided. But as his right foot left the ground in his spring the mare moved sideways, and Stephen, failing to reach the saddle, fell heavily against Kellett. The latter, following the example of his superior, swore horribly, and smote Stephen on the ear with clenched fist.

"Oh, you cowards! You cowards!" Stephen picked himself up from the cobblestones, upon which he had measured his length, to find Lady Averill, a picture of righteous indignation, standing at the entrance to the stable yard. "For shame, Sir Randolph! First you strike your prisoner with your whip, and then look calmly on whilst one of your dreadful men fells him to the ground. Have you no mercy, no compassion? I wonder would you have dared thus if the poor fellow's hands had been free. 'Tis easy to be brave when one's opponent is helpless, sir."

"You wrong me, Lady Averill," protested Sir Randolph, crimson with confusion and shame. "The fellow insulted me, and my temper is quick. But there was no excuse for Kellett's action, and I promise you he shall be fitly punished."

"There was more excuse for him than for you, sir," said Averill frigidly. "He did but follow your lead, in the hope of currying favor with you. 'Like master like man,' is a proverb in these parts, sir. And as for you, uncle," she continued, turning to the Colonel, "I am ashamed of you. How can you stand by and see such things done without a protest?"

"By Jupiter! madam, you scarce gave me time to protest, did you?" said the colonel drily. "Being a woman, you are a thought quicker in the uptake than I am. But let that pass. I am quite as ashamed as you are that such brutality should be the lot of anyone who sojourns either willingly or unwillingly within my gates, and"—to Stephen —"I offer you my apologies, sir."

"You have naught for which to apologize, Colonel

Oldfield," said Stephen courteously. "A gentleman cannot forestall the action of a cad, sir, for the simple reason that it is impossible for his mind to conceive that action."

"Have a care, sirrah," cried Sir Randolph, touched on the raw by his prisoner's contemptuous remark. "You shall pay dearly for that word ere you are much older."

"Pay, shall I?" said Stephen, with a sudden gust of passion. "Let me tell you this, Randolph Gorst. I vow that, once I regain my freedom, I will thrash you within an inch of your worthless life. Do you hear?"

"Aye, I hear." Sir Randolph laughed easily. "If you carry out your threat, methinks 'twill be in the next world, not in this. You have robbed your last coach, my friend, and the only freedom you are likely to know is when the gallows rope releases your soul from your body."

"I shouldn't be too confident of that, Sir Randolph," Averill broke in again, with quiet significance. "The task of proving a wrongdoer's guilt is sometimes both difficult and embarrassing to the informer."

Gorst again flushed darkly; but here Mr. Crisp, who was growing impatient, thought it time to assert himself.

"Come, come, we are wasting time," he said fussily. "Kellett, help the prisoner into his saddle." Kellett sulkily obeyed. "That's it. Now tie his feet together beneath his horse's belly."

"Is that necessary?" cried Averill sharply.

"I consider it advisable, madam," said Mr. Crisp, with an indulgent smile. "I dare not take any more risks."

Stephen's feet having been securely linked together, the High Constable and his men got to horse, and the party moved out of the stable yard. Mr. Crisp lingered to address a few perfunctory words of thanks to the Colonel for his hospitality, and then, turning to Gorst, whose horse was being walked back and forth by a groom, he called:

"Aren't you coming along with me, Sir Randolph? I

shall want you to swear the depositions against this man, and you might as well do it at once."

But Sir Randolph was not given the opportunity to reply. Alverford, to his disgust, had not been admitted to Colonel Oldfield's interview with the High Constable and Gorst, and he had consoled himself with the companionship of Miss Sylvia Ravenscourt. She would have had him find a rod then and there and go down to the river to teach her to fish, and at any other time he would have been only too ready to conform to her wishes. But he had work to do. He had promised that he would endeavor to delay the High Constable, and although he did not see how this was to be done, he was determined to neglect no opportunity of attempting it.

With this purpose in mind he ensconced himself near a window which overlooked the main drive, and when the Colonel and his companions left the house to seek their prisoner, he promptly suggested to Sylvia that it would be interesting to go outside again to watch the escort depart. She eagerly fell in with his proposal, and together they walked across to the stables. Once there, Sylvia's inconsequent chatter entirely precluded the evolution in Harry's brain of a plan whereby he might accomplish his object, with the result that the departure of the prisoner and his escort found him helpless.

But the High Constable's invitation to Sir Randolph to accompany him gave him an idea. He could at least prevent Gorst's accepting it, and that would make one man less to fight in the event of force being used to encompass Stephen's escape, besides depriving Mr. Crisp, who Harry conjectured was an incompetent fool, of Gorst's resourceful brain.

So, with a quick word of excuse to Sylvia, and before Sir Randolph could reply to the High Constable, he stepped forward and called:

"No, Sir Randolph isn't coming with ya, Crisp. I've a word or two to say to him that won't wait, b'jove."

The High Constable had not hitherto been aware of Lord Alderford's presence, and he now swept off his hat with a flourish and bowed profoundly.

"Quite so, your lordship, quite so," he said effusively, his sycophantic abasement almost toppling him out of his saddle. "My business with Sir Randolph can very well wait, your lordship, very well indeed. Only too pleased to be able to oblige your lordship. It isn't every day that one has such a privilege. Good day to you, your lordship; your very humble servant. Good day, Sir Randolph; I will communicate with you later." And with another bow and flourish he put very gentle spurs to his horse and ambled away in the wake of his men.

"My carriage waits, Randolph," said Harry languidly, but with a steely glint in his eye that Gorst did not fail to observe. "Pray accompany me."

"Impossible, Harry," returned Gorst. "As you see, I have my horse here."

"That doesn't matter," said Harry. "Ya can send a groom over for him later."

"But 'tis most unconvenient, Harry," objected Gorst. "I am going——"

"I'm afraid I must insist." Then in low tones, which were intended only for Sir Randolph's ear, he said calmly: "'Twill pay ya best to do as I ask, Gorst. If ya object further I'll tell the Colonel all I know, 'pon my soul and honor I will, and that at once."

Sir Randolph started in alarm. "You surely wouldn't be such a fool," he growled incredulously.

"My good man, everybody knows I am a fool," retorted Harry coolly. "If ya doubt it, ask the Colonel; he'll tell ya."

Muttering an imprecation, Sir Randolph turned away, and with the best grace he could muster made his adieux.

Then he stalked out of the yard and took his seat in the carriage which stood ready to depart.

Within a minute or two Harry joined him, and the carriage began to roll on its cumbersome way. Almost immediately the viscount leaned forward, and, staring fixedly into the eyes of his companion, he said in a voice that Sir Randolph had never before heard issue from his lips:

"Well, what have ya to say for ya'self, ya damned traitor?"

"Say for myself?" He laughed contemptuously. "Nothing, my friend; nothing at all."

"Nothing, eh? We'll see about that." Harry's mouth set in hard, stern lines which frankly amazed his companion. "I'll have ya hounded out of the country for last night's work, burn me and blister me if I don't—aye, and out of all decent society as well, ya knave!"

Sir Randolph leaned back comfortably in his seat and smiled easily. "I think not, Harry," he said. "You——"

"Lord Alverford, if ya please, Sir Randolph Gorst," interposed Harry, with studied insolence of manner.

The other flushed. "As you will," he said, with a not very successful assumption of indifference. "Your friendship is no longer of use to me, and, to be candid, you bore me most damnably. Nevertheless, I would counsel you not to be so unwise as to tell everything you know as to the events of last night."

"And why shouldn't I? Do ya think I am going to let Steve remain in such a pestilent position without raising a finger?"

"Bah! Let him rot in gaol. What concern is it of yours?"

Very deliberately Harry raised his quizzing glass and through it eyed his companion incredulously. "Gad! ya positively bewilder me, b'jove," he drawled. "Are ya utterly shameless?"

"In this instance, yes, I am shameless. I hate Burgoyne

as the devil hates holy water. Long ago I swore to be even with him for a dirty, underhand trick he played me, and I have kept my word, damn him. He will hang, and 'tis all he is fit for, the upstart puppy."

"Please spare me your abuse of my friend, Sir Randolph," said Harry coldly. "Frankly, I do not believe ya. I know Steve too well to deem him capable of an underhand trick."

"You think you know him, but believe me you don't. Buck Burgoyne will stoop to aught that will serve his ends. What does he in Bolderburn? Answer me that."

"Ya know the reason as well as I do. He is here because his horse went lame on his journey south, and he——"

"A fairy tale that would not deceive a babe!" interjected Gorst, with a sneer.

" 'Tis no fairy tale. I have seen the nag with my own eyes, b'jove."

"Oh, I don't question his horse's lameness," said Sir Randolph impatiently. "But doesn't it strike you as strange that such an accident should happen so conveniently close to Lady Averill Stapleton's home?"

"What the devil do ya mean, sir?" cried Harry angrily.

"My meaning is obvious. Burgoyne deliberately contrived that lameness to give him a plausible excuse for lingering here so that he might be near Lady Averill."

"Hum!" The assertion appeared to give Harry food for thought, and for awhile he sat with puckered brow. Then he said: "And even supposing that what ya say is true—what of it?"

"What of it?" echoed Sir Randolph, in astonishment. "Damme, sir, but one might think you had no brains at all! Don't you see that he is a suitor for the lady's hand?"

"Maybe so, but, as I say, what of it?" repeated Harry blandly.

"For heaven's sake don't talk like a damned parrot," cried Gorst, exasperated almost beyond endurance by what he believed to be the other's lack of comprehension. "If

Burgoyne be in earnest as I am convinced he is, you will find him no mean rival. Famous, wealthy, handsome, and a friend of the Prince himself, the finest lady in the land might well think twice ere she refused him—even if there did happen to be a viscount at hand ready and willing to console her for his loss."

"Ya state the case to a nicety, and I can see no flaw in it." Harry yawned prodigiously. "But, dooce take it, ya forget that I have no right whatever to object if Averill should choose Steve instead of me. Of course, I should be plaguey upset and all that," he continued hastily, "but I should have to make the best of it."

"Yes, yes, but that's not the point," argued Sir Randolph irascibly. "As long as Burgoyne remains in gaol you have a clear field, and if he be hanged—well, 'twill be one rival the less."

"Gad, Gorst! ya are the most unscrupulous villain it has ever been my luck to meet," declared Harry, gazing at his companion with eyes full of admiring wonder.

"I am nothing of the kind," protested the other. "But as your friend, I fail to see why you should put yourself out for Burgoyne's sake. I tell you that he came here with the deliberate intention of winning Lady Averill from you, and he deceived you with a cock-and-bull story of a lame horse. Was that a friendly act?"

Harry made no reply, and Gorst, thinking that his arguments were having their effect, proceeded eagerly:

"What good could you do if, as you have threatened, you tell all you know? For one thing, nobody would believe your story."

"Oh, yes, they would, b'jove. Everybody hereabouts knows that I am not half clever enough to invent such a tale." Harry said this with as much complacence as another man might have shown in justly proclaiming himself the cleverest fellow in all England.

"Well, even so, how would you benefit?" questioned

Gorst, quick to see his advantage. "If you were believed, then you would be promptly arrested to stand your trial alongside Burgoyne, and, with all your influence, your plight would be a sorry one. On the other hand, I should go scot free, for, far from committing a crime, I have been instrumental in preventing one."

"Ya would reap the scorn and contempt of all decent men," Harry reminded him coldly.

The other winced perceptibly, and he summoned to his aid a touch of bravado. "That is by no means certain," he said airily. "The tale as I should tell it would discredit you, not me, Lord Alverford. And I think I could make it sufficiently convincing. The world is always more ready to believe the accuser than the accused, you know."

"Aye, I grant that scandal finds a readier welcome than truth, even in the most blameless households," agreed Harry. "But fortunately the law demands proof. However, 'tis a profitless discussion. My mind is made up."

Sir Randolph sneered openly. "'Tis news to me that you possess such a thing as a mind," he said insolently.

"Is't indeed?" returned Harry indifferently. "Well, I hope ya will ponder the news; 'twere a wise thing to do."

"I don't think I shall trouble, sir. In any case the workings of the mind of one who is but half-witted are difficult for a sane man to follow."

Harry's temper snapped suddenly, and Gorst saw the knuckles of his clenched hands stand out milk-white.

"By God, Gorst, but ya go too far!" he said tensely. "Listen to me. Steve Burgoyne will neither hang nor rot in gaol. There is one factor of the situation that, with all ya' damned cunning, ya have forgotten, and that is the man ya hired to take ya' place. Ah! that makes ya think, does it, b'jove? And mark my words; ya will have good cause to think, and to think dooced hard, ere you are much older, ya blackguard."

The other's only reply was a yawn which, as was intended, added fuel to the flames of the young man's wrath.

"And before we part, Sir Randolph Gorst, let me warn ya to keep out of my way in the future. 'Twas no idle threat I made when I said I would hound ya out of society, as ya will find; if ever ya venture into any company in which I chance to be, I'll insult ya before 'em all."

Gorst's eyes narrowed, and he laughed dangerously. "I think not, my little cock-sparrow," he said. "Insults must be paid for, and you would be well advised to count the cost beforehand."

"Ya mean I should have to fight ya?"

"Of course."

"I think not. Gentlemen, are only compelled to fight gentlemen, and I regret to say that I don't consider ya as such."

Sir Randolph went white with anger. "The coward's usual excuse!" he countered, with an ugly sneer. "You doubtless know that my pistol is said to shoot passing straight. But public opinion would force you to the combat, my pretty craven; remember that."

"Oh, 'tis not ya' pistol's accuracy that troubles me; 'tis ya' despicable character."

"You little rat!" cried Gorst. "Do you think you can frighten me?" He laughed harshly. "Why, you brainless dolt, you cannot see beyond the end of your nose, so 'tis little cause I have to fear you. The boot is on the other leg, my friend. You think that you are going to marry Lady Averill Stapleton, you presumptuous imbecile, but you are vastly mistaken. She will marry me. Do you hear? Me, I say. I will get her though all the fiends of hell bar my way; so look out, your lordship. 'Twill go hard with the man who tries to stay me."

Harry stared at Sir Randolph in incredulous disgust. "Averill marry you!" he breathed. "God forbid! An angel and a satyr."

"Satyr or no, I'll wed her," cried Gorst grimly. "Either that or I'll ruin her."

Harry sat silent for a moment; then he laughed contemptuously, but there was a note of uneasiness in his laughter. "I think the matter can safely be left in Averill's hands," he said. "She would be more likely to wed her groom than you, b'jove. Ya will have little chance of carrying out ya' threat, methinks."

"Be not too sure, your lordship. That chance has already been mine, but I neglected it—perhaps foolishly."

"Ya are lying, Gorst," returned Harry contemptuously.

"Am I? You have forgotten last night, then. Why, man, had the original scheme been carried out I had been half way to Gretna with her by now."

"Ya—ya—what the devil do ya mean?" cried Harry.

"What I say. You thought the affair a frolic that would better your prospects with her, and that I was merely abetting you. You poor fool! 'Twas I who would have carried her off, not you; and that would have been the last you had seen of her until she was my wife for good and all. But I thought better of it. Upon reflection, I decided that, for the nonce, the rôle of rescuer would suit me better than that of abductor, and so I changed my plans. Your lordship will, I am sure, appreciate that it was not possible for me to acquaint you with the change."

"Gad! ya pollute the very air ya breathe," exclaimed Harry, aghast at Gorst's sneering and boastful confession of his villainy. "Luckily we are come to the village, and I must ask ya to relieve me of ya' company." He stopped the carriage, and, without protest, Sir Randolph alighted and stood regarding him with a contemptuous smile on his face.

"Aye, smile, Gorst, smile whilst ya have the opportunity. Ya will have precious little cause for merriment anon," prophesied Harry, as he signalled his coachman to proceed.

CHAPTER X

RELATES WHAT CHANCED ON THE WAY TO DARNCHESTER GAOL

A MULTITUDE of conflicting thoughts fought for the mastery in Stephen's mind as he jogged along uncomfortably in the midst of his escort. The shame of his position, which assailed him afresh every time the eyes of a passer-by rested upon him, was temporarily forgotten as he recalled the kindness of Lady Averill and the faith which, for no apparent reason, she appeared to have in him. The recollection of her beauty and her trust thrilled him; and he knew that, although he had seen her but twice, she had stamped upon his mind an impression that only death itself could efface.

Yet what a fool he was to let his thoughts dwell upon her! Was he not a prisoner, a malefactor captured red-handed in his crime, condemned already to lie in gaol for an indefinite period and to have his infamy published to the world? It was even possible—nay, vastly probable—that he would expiate his sins on the scaffold; indeed, he opined that nothing short of a miracle could save him from such a fate. Highway robbery and abduction were crimes punishable with death, and the law was rightly merciless in its vengeance in such cases. His social position and his wealth would probably avail him little, and in any case transportation was the lightest punishment for which he could hope.

But from these depths of despair he was lifted a little by the memory of Alverford's visit to his prison-house. Harry was not there by accident; of that he was sure.

He came for a reason that was not obvious, but certainly that reason was not the one which he had voiced to Colonel Oldfield. And his acting had been decidedly clever—far cleverer than anyone who knew him would have believed possible—and he had contrived to combine it with his usual foppish inanity in a manner that must have dispelled any suspicion as to his motives that the Colonel or his household may have harbored.

Furthermore, there was Carless's promise to brighten the outlook. But when Stephen considered the strength of the High Constable's party, he abandoned hope in this direction. Once the prison gates closed behind him, he knew that Carless could do nothing for him, and he felt certain that he would never dream of adopting the desperate expedient of an attempted rescue by force on the public highway in broad daylight.

But his musings were at length cut short by the High Constable's reining in his horse and commanding his men to halt.

Drawn up by the roadside Stephen saw, a travelling tinker's cart, to the shafts of which was harnessed a donkey. On the side of the cart was displayed a large white placard, bearing, in block letters very badly printed by hand, the legend:

WILLIAM NOBLETT
HARDWARE DEALER
PATERNIZED BY THE NOBILITY AND GENTERY

The tinker himself was kneeling almost under his donkey's nose, and was supporting on one knee the head of an apparently unconscious man, whose sombre attire proclaimed him to be a clergyman. The latter's eyes were closed, and the tinker, at whose side stood a tin pail half full of water, was bathing his pale face with a piece of rag, and talking diligently to his patient in an undertone the while.

"Come on, now; open yer peepers, mister. Let's 'ave a look at yer bonny blue eyes. Lyin' on yer back on the

cold ground ain't good for yer, d'ye 'ear? Lor' love me boots! you'll be getting skyattic's or rheumatics or some'at o' that sort if ye ain't quick. If only I'd a drop o' rum, now, or even a sup o' good French brandy, I'd 'ave ye as right as a trivet in no time. Though 'appen it's better not," he continued dubiously. "'Appen, bein' a parson, ye wouldn't thank me for pourin' strong liquor into ye."

Beyond a casual glance, the tinker paid no attention to the little band of riders, but, as he paused in his monologue to damp his rag afresh, the High Constable addressed him sharply.

"What's all this, my man?" he said. "Has the gentleman met with an accident?"

"Accident?" echoed the tinker indignantly. "No, it ain't no accident, this ain't, swelp me! If ye arsks me, it's some o' Black Dick's work, this 'ere."

Mr. Crisp started violently, and Stephen noted that the tinker's reply caused a wave of excitement to ripple over his troop.

"What do you mean, fellow?" asked the High Constable sternly. "And what do you know of Black Dick?"

"Naught, except from hearsay," answered the tinker promptly. "But I'll lay odds as it were 'im as done up this pore cove. A big hulking chap wiv a black marsk an' a blue chin, 'e was, with the nastiest lookin' barker, all cocked an' ready, as I ever seed."

"You saw him!" ejaculated Mr. Crisp incredulously.

"Aye, I seed him all right, I did. Me an' Adam was behind yonder bushes a-eatin' of our dinners, an' I reckon as 'e thought the coast was clear, for 'e didn't make no bones about it, but just did the job as bold as brass an' as careless as you please. You 'aven't got a drop o' rum about ye, now, 'ave ye, mister?" he continued, looking appealing at Mr. Crisp, and then gazing anxiously at his patient, who showed no sign of life. "It might 'elp this pore parson, though it may be a bit again' 'is principles."

The High Constable turned in his saddle, and gave orders to one of his men to relieve the tinker of his task and to administer a little brandy to the unconscious clergyman.

"Now, fellow, attend to me," he said peremptorily, addressing the tinker. "I am the High Constable, and I command you to tell me all you know of this affair."

The tinker rose hastily to his feet in obvious confusion, and taking off his battered hat, he touched his right eyebrow with his forefinger, and stood nervously shifting from one foot to the other.

"Lor' love me boots! yer highness, I didn't know ye," he said, in awestruck accents, "I arsks yer highness's pardon, I does, swelp me!"

"That's all right," said Mr. Crisp, with affable condescension, not ill-pleased by the exaggerated deference paid to his rank by the tinker. "Proceed with your story."

"There ain't much more to tell, yer highness. I seed parson first, a-ridin' easy from the north. Then t'other feller, him as I reckon is Black Dick, appeared from t'other way, and as soon as 'e spots parson 'e stops dead. Then 'e wheels 'is 'orse quick into that lane there"—he pointed to a lane which opened at right angles off the main highway, and which was screened from the north by a wood—"an' puttin' on a marsk 'e waits in the shadow o' the trees till parson gets almost abreast of 'im. Then 'e spurs forward sharp, a-brandishin' of a big barker, an' makes parson 'and over what looks like a packet, as 'e took out of 'is inside coat pocket. Dick laughs when 'e gets it; but when 'e'd put it out o' sight 'e did a low-down, mean thing."

"What was that?"

"Why, yer highness, he shifts 'is pistol to 'is left 'and, an' afore ye could say Jack Robinson 'e lams parson one under the jaw an' knocks 'im flyin' out o' the saddle into the road, where 'e lies still and quiet. Dick looks down at parson an' laughs again, and then suddenly 'e stretches out 'is foot an' kicks parson's 'orse as 'ard as 'e can. 'Orse

turns about, feared to death, an' sets off 'ell-for-leather back the way as 'e came. Dick watches 'im for a minute, then 'e gathers up 'is reins an' disappears."

"Which way did he go?" asked Mr. Crisp, displaying some excitement.

"Down the lane as 'e wus 'idin' in. An' wot's more, 'e can't 'ave got so far, neither, yer 'ighness. It's not ten minutes since it 'appened, an' I seed as the bay mare as 'e wus ridin' wus lame."

"You're sure of that?" The High Constable's eyes were alight.

"Sure an' certain, yer 'ighness," replied the tinker emphatically. "An' the goin's bad down that lane. It leads on to the roughest part o' the moor, an' three or four men on good 'orses like these 'ere o' yours ought to catch 'im as easy as pie inside 'arf an hour, swelp me! 'E'll be in full sight nearly all the way across the moor, an' a lame 'orse ain't no good for that kind o' country."

"You're right, my good fellow. I've half a mind to——"

But here the recumbent clergyman groaned, and, opening his eyes, he sat up suddenly and gazed around him wildly. Then, catching sight of Stephen sitting bound to his horse, his face brightened, and he cried joyously:

"Ah, thank God! You have caught the miscreant, gentlemen. Oh, I am indeed grateful to you, sirs, for——"

Mr. Crisp cut him short. "This is not the man who robbed you, sir," he said, somewhat curtly. "I am the High Constable, and this fellow is in my custody on another count."

The light faded from the clergyman's face, and he rose stiffly to his feet—a woebegone and dishevelled figure.

"Sir, I am desolate," he said heavily. "I had hoped—but no matter." Then the cloud lifted a little from his smooth-shaven face, and he raised his eyes to the horseman's face. "If you are indeed an officer of the law, then you must have been sent by heaven to aid me in my travail.

All is surely not yet lost. After him, sir, I beg of you. He cannot have got far. And may heaven reward you for your charity."

But Mr. Crisp was the prey of indecision. He glanced uneasily at his little band, at his prisoner, and then at the clergyman—torn between the thought of the glory that would be his if he laid by the heels the notorious Black Dick, who had so long been a thorn in the flesh of the whole county, and his impatience to see his prisoner safely lodged in gaol.

"You place me in a dilemma, sir," he said gruffly. "I am charged with the duty of conveying my prisoner to gaol, and he is a desperate and hardened criminal with whom no risks may be run."

The clergyman stared at the escort for a moment, and then said eagerly: "But, sir, your prisoner is securely bound, and you have six men. Surely you can spare some of them in such a case. Oh, sir, this means ruin and perhaps disgrace to me. I was entrusted with the money, and gave my personal undertaking that it should arrive safely. And three hundred pounds is a huge sum."

"What's that you say? Three hundred pounds?" cried Mr. Crisp. "Zounds! and that damned fellow got away with it. Curse him! Those confounded justices will make my life a misery when they hear of this." His eyes narrowed suddenly, and he scrutinized the clergyman suspiciously. "How came you to be carrying such a sum?"

"Alas! I had no choice," returned the other, almost tearfully. "'Twas part of the proceeds from the sale of some fat stock which had been bequeathed to the church by a wealthy farmer. He left it one half at the disposal of my bishop, and the other half to be placed with the Bishop of Malton in Cheshire, and it was the latter portion that I carried."

"'Fore gad! that makes it fifty times worse," said Mr. Crisp, cursing under his breath. "Those bishops are the

very devil where money is concerned, and I shall never hear the last of it. You are sure of what you told me, sirrah?" he asked of the tinker.

"Aye, that I am," declared the tinker. "An' beggin' yer highness's pardon, it's easy money, is this 'ere, swelp me! You've lost a good bit o' time, but if you acts promp', you'll catch 'im right enough. 'Is 'orse can scarce trot, an' in the direction as 'e's gone there ain't a 'idin'-place for nigh fifteen miles as would cover Adam 'ere."

"When I want your advice I'll ask for it," snapped Mr. Crisp. "Kellett, you have heard what has been said. Take Jones and Birtwistle and ride like the devil. Get Black Dick, alive if possible—but get him, do you hear?"

"Very good, sir," mumbled Kellett, who was plainly not enamored of the task.

Observing this, the clergyman spoke again quickly. "Gladly will I give twenty guineas to these good fellows if they capture him," he said. "Although I am a poor man, the bishop will doubtless reimburse me."

His reluctance dispelled by this golden promise, Kellett spurred forward with alacrity, and, with his two companions, made ready to depart.

"Us'll get 'im if 'e's to be got, sir," he said grimly. "Shall we take 'im straight to Darnchester?"

"Aye, 'twill be best," replied Mr. Crisp. "And once you've got him, spare neither whip nor spur in your going."

The three men saluted and cantered away down the lane; and as the High Constable and the remnants of his troop watched them go, Stephen, whose glance had wandered in the direction of the tinker, could have sworn that he saw that honest tradesman wink. But before he could gain a second impression that might serve to confirm the first, Mr. Crisp gave a sharp order, and the party prepared to move.

"God bless you, sir!" said the clergyman with devout earnestness to Mr. Crisp. "May He reward you as you deserve. You may be sure that your good offices shall be

brought to the notice of my bishop, and I do not doubt that he will see that they are handsomely recognized. He is a man of great influence, sir."

"What do you propose to do now, sir?" asked the gratified Mr. Crisp solicitously. "I would I had a spare horse that I might lend you."

"Oh, that matters little. 'Twill do me no harm to walk on to the Nag's Head at Bolderburn. I am known to the landlord there, and can easily borrow a horse and the wherewithal to continue my journey. For I dare not delay; I must seek out the Bishop of Malton at once and acquaint him with the unfortunate facts. If you recover the money I pray you send a courier to me there. I will gladly pay his charges. My name is Willoughby."

They parted from the parson and the tinker, and Mr. Crisp, anxious to make up the time which he had lost, began to set a pace which Stephen, bound as he was, found decidedly uncomfortable. Very soon, the thorn hedges which bounded the highway disappeared, and the road ahead lay across open ground dotted sparsely with clumps of yellow gorse. This Stephen took to be a part of the moor of which the tinker had spoken, and he looked about him, half expecting to catch a glimpse of the three men who hunted the highwayman. But hereabouts the ground was undulating, and he could not see farther than fifty yards or so either to the right or left. However, the highway itself was almost straight as an arrow, and at least a mile of its dusty surface was visible. But there was not a soul in sight; the road was entirely deserted.

Yet as Stephen's wandering gaze focused itself upon a large clump of trees which topped a knoll close to the road about a quarter of a mile way, he thought he saw a quick flash of light come from their midst—such a flash as might be caused by the rays of the sun being reflected by polished metal. However, stare as he would, his keen eyes could

detect nothing further, and a glance at his captors told him that they had not observed anything unusual.

Just then his ears caught the ring of hoofs in the rear, and he saw Mr. Crisp turn sharply in his saddle, though without checking his pace. Stephen thought it wisest to show no interest in the sound, for he read uneasiness in the High Constable's expression, and his heart bounded suddenly within him.

"What do you make of those fellows behind, Bradbury?" queried Mr. Crisp sharply.

The man addressed, who was riding at Stephen's side, looked back over his shoulder; and after a keen scrutiny he answered with a nonchalance that promptly dispelled Stephen's half-formed hope.

"Two fat tradesmen, sir," he said succinctly.

"Hum! Maybe; but they're riding good nags, else they couldn't move at that pace," grumbled Mr. Crisp.

"Aye. Their hosses is all right," agreed Bradbury. "But look at th' way they sit 'em. And their clothes and their beards. Tradesmen, I say. No danger from yon sort, sir, particularly when there's nobbut two of 'em."

But Mr. Crisp had good cause for his uneasiness. He was scarce ten yards from the clump of trees which Stephen had previously noticed when a harsh voice bade him halt, and a man, mounted on a big bay mare, appeared from behind the trees and wheeled his mount across the High Constable's path.

Taken by surprise, Mr. Crisp had much ado to check his steed in time to avoid a collision, and his unexpected action threw his troop into confusion. A second man made his appearance, and to Mr. Crisp's horror and Stephen's delight, they saw that the newcomers were masked, and that each held in his hands a pair of cocked pistols.

"Good morning, Mr. Crisp," remarked he who had first appeared—a big, well-built man with a dark face, and eyes that twinkled merrily behind his mask. "If either you or

any of your subordinates make a move, I shall be regretfully obliged to shoot *you,* sir. Is that clear? And, lest one of your men should think his action well worth your sacrifice, one of my friends in your rear will shoot him. You are caught between two fires."

Glancing quickly over his shoulder, Stephen saw that the two men who Bradbury had dubbed tradesmen had ridden up close, and that they also were armed with pistols. Neither of them wore a mask, but their hats were pulled down over their eyes in such a manner that it was impossible to get more than a faint impression of their heavily bearded faces.

"You had better empty their holsters, and then they will not be tempted to play tricks," said the highwayman to his masked companion, who, with neatness and despatch, did as he was bidden. "Now, Mr. Crisp, I am sorry to interfere with you in the discharge of your duties, but I feel sure that you will recognize the necessity. You have in custody a very dear friend of mine, and I am very loth that he should hang. Hence I will relieve you of your charge, so that he may not be exposed to any such danger."

"You—you are going to set him free?" said the chagrined Crisp, in quavering tones. "Is—is that all you are going to do?"

"All that matters!" said the highwayman, with a laugh. "For the rest, I shall leave you in peace, though of course I shall first be compelled to ensure that you cannot follow hot-foot upon my trail. The precaution is vital to me, if a little inconvenient to you. You appreciate that?"

But the High Constable, now that danger to his person was no longer imminent, had turned sulky and answered nothing.

"What! Vexed, are you, Mr. Crisp?" the highwayman rallied him. "Nay, sir, look not so glum. 'Tis the fortune of war—my turn today, yours yesterday and perhaps to-morrow. For yesterday you captured two friends of mine,

and tomorrow you may capture me. Black Dick would be a prize worth taking, eh?"

"Aye, and I'll get you yet, damn you," growled Mr. Crisp, growing bolder. "You will rue this day's work ere you are much older."

"Say you so, sir? Well, we shall see. Did you come across my good parson?"

"I did so," said Mr. Crisp grimly.

"And had he regained consciousness?" asked the highwayman, with solicitude. "I fear I hit him over hard," he added regretfully.

"He came round before I left him, and he told me how you had robbed him of three hundred pounds," replied Mr. Crisp, eyeing him suspiciously. "But that damned tinker bubbled me."

The highwayman heaved a sigh. "Ah, sir, you little know how sorely it hurt me to rob one so holy," he said, shaking his head dolefully. "But I was so sadly in need of money that I had not cracked a bottle for nigh forty-eight hours. That must be my excuse, Mr. Crisp. But did I hear you say something of a tinker who had basely deceived you?"

"Aye, you did. He was trying to bring the parson round when I arrived on the scene, and he told me that you had departed east and rode a lame horse, the lying knave! But I'll have him in gaol for it, I promise you," declared Mr. Crisp vindictively.

"You would wrong him, Mr. Crisp," said the highwayman gravely. "He gave you the facts as he saw them. Although I thought my encounter with the reverend gentleman went unobserved, I never neglect precautions, Mr. Crisp. Thus I had embedded a sharp flint in my horse's hoof prior to the meeting, and afterwards I rode east until I reached the end of the wood. There I dismounted and removed the flint, and, skirting the wood,

came back to the road. 'Tis very simple, but you would scarce expect a tinker to see through it."

During this strange colloquy Stephen's bonds had been removed, but no word had been spoken to him. The keenest scrutiny of his rescuers had told him nothing; they were all complete strangers to him, and he was at a loss to know the reason for their interference on his behalf. He could only conclude that, by some extraordinary means, Carless had hired them for the purpose, and he sat awaiting the outcome of his adventure with no little interest.

"And now perhaps you will dismount, Mr. Crisp, and instruct your men to do likewise," pursued the highwayman pleasantly. "Your society pleasures me, but time presses, and I must away."

"You are not going to steal our horses, are you?" cried the High Constable in dismay.

"Certainly not, Mr. Crisp," replied the other reproachfully. "I am merely going to borrow them for awhile, that is all. I will release them in the course of an hour or two, and doubtless when you reach Darnchester you will find they have already arrived there. Horses have a happy knack of finding their stables, you know."

"But what the devil am I to do? Do you intend that I and my men shall walk?"

"I regret to say that I do. And remember that you will go forward, and will not hark back upon your tracks." The raillery had gone from the highwayman's voice, and his mouth was set in hard, uncompromising lines.

"But that means that we shall have to walk all the way," protested Mr. Crisp despairingly. "There is not an inn between here and Darnchester at which we can hire four horses."

"That is unfortunate, I grant, Mr. Crisp. Yet I warn you that 'twould be unwise in you to go in the direction from which you have come, and with that warning I will bid you a very good day and a pleasant journey."

He turned to Stephen, and with a peremptory "Follow me, sir," wheeled his horse off the road and set off across the moor in a north-easterly direction. This caused Stephen some surprise and not a little dismay. He had confidently expected that they would turn back towards Bolderburn, and he began to wonder if his escape from the clutches of the law promised as pleasant a prospect as he had anticipated.

For two or three miles they rode in silence; then the leader, who had removed his mask, gave orders for the High Constable's horses to be headed towards Darnchester and released. This done, they continued on their way; and after proceeding steadily for about a quarter of an hour, they reached the edge of the moor and entered a narrow lane. Five minutes later they came to an old disused barn, and here the leader halted and dismounted, bidding Stephen do likewise. He obeyed, and was then curtly instructed to go into the barn and wait.

"We will disperse here, gentlemen," Stephen heard the leader say. "I am vastly grateful for your help, and I need hardly bid you make yourselves scarce without unnecessary delay. Sam, I shall require your horse for the use of the man we have rescued; take the mare he rode in exchange. You haven't far to go, but have a care that you don't ride her too close to home lest she be recognized. Turn her loose when you have done with her. Your own mount shall be returned to you within the next few hours."

The beat of the departing hoofs grew fainter and fainter, and at last ceased altogether. The dark-visaged highwayman, having watched his men out of sight, glanced sharply round him, and, taking the bridles of the two horses that remained, he led them into the barn and closed the crazy door. Then, turning to Stephen, he said quietly:

"I have redeemed my promise, you see, Mr. Burgoyne."

Stephen stared at him in astonishment. The highwayman's voice, which had hitherto been gruff and harsh, had

changed entirely, and he knew it at once for that of his former companion in distress.

"Carless!" he cried in delight, stepping forward and seizing the other's two hands in his own. "'Fore gad! your own mother wouldn't know you. No wonder Crisp mistook you for Black Dick."

"'Twas no mistake," returned Carless, in the same quiet tones. "I am Black Dick."

"You are Black Dick!" echoed the bewildered Stephen. "I am afraid I don't understand."

"Then I will explain, but I must be brief. As I told you in the summer-house, men call me the Squire of Worpleden. Well, so I am, and so were my fathers before me. Worpleden Hall has been occupied by a Carless for nigh two hundred years. But my family has never been famous either for thrift or foresight, and my father was no exception to the rule. When I was eighteen my mother died; and he took me to Italy, ostensibly to finish my education. There we lived in idleness and apparent affluence until about two years ago, when, after my father's death, I returned to England to find that, during our long absence, the rascally lawyer in whose hands my father had left the management of his estates had so contrived matters that all that remained to me was the Hall and its surrounding farms, burdened with a mortgage which rendered them worthless. There was I, at the age of thirty-one, penniless, and unable to earn a living because I had no trade. But I had been robbed, Mr. Burgoyne, robbed by one whose knowledge of the law rendered him immune from punishment; and that set me an example which I determined to follow. I made robbery my trade, as the lawyer had made it his, but I practised mine openly."

"You became a highwayman!" cried Stephen incredulously.

"I did. The trade is a hazardous one, but it has paid me passing well. And, as you heard me tell Crisp, I never

neglect precautions. I don the same black wig, the same make-up, and the same disguise whenever I find it necessary to replenish my purse, and those who know Ned Carless for Black Dick are few and trustworthy. I had been taken long ago else. But I see my story disconcerts you, sir. Well, I cannot blame you; the company of a cut-purse can scarce be a delight to one in your station," he concluded bitterly, pulling off his black wig and exposing his fair curly hair to view.

Stephen seized him by the shoulders, and, holding him thus, looked him full in the eyes.

"Never speak such words to me again, Ned," he chided gently, using the other's Christian name for the first time. "Your trade is your own concern, but, be you the devil himself, you have made me your grateful friend for life. No house that I ever occupy and no board at which I chance to sit but shall cry Ned Carless a thousand welcomes should he honor me by sharing them."

"Thank you, Burgoyne," said Carless simply. He turned away and picked up an old bucket which lay in a corner, and, after peering cautiously through a hole in the door, went outside, to return presently with a pail brimming with clear water.

"There you are, Burgoyne. Make yourself as spick and span as possible," he said cheerily, setting down the pail at Stephen's feet. "And the quicker you are the better; I have no wish to be seen here—although that is scarce likely, for we are half a mile from the nearest house."

Quickly Stephen washed the dirt from his face and hands, whilst Carless transformed himself into his fair-complexioned, natural self.

Suddenly Stephen laughed. "I thought you said you never neglected precautions, Ned," he said quizzically.

Carless, who was strenuously rubbing his face with a towel which he had taken from one of his saddlebags, looked up sharply, a shadow of alarm in his eyes.

"Nor do I," he said shortly.

"What of last night, then? Why did you neglect to transform yourself into Black Dick before joining Alverford and me in our enterprise?"

"For two reasons. The first was that when Sir Randolph Gorst pressed me into his service I was without my disguise, and the second was that I did not take the venture seriously."

"I see. Then Sir Randolph does not know that it was Black Dick with whom he dealt?"

"He does not. And his ignorance will cost him dear some day," replied Carless grimly. "And you, Burgoyne? Did you wear a greatcoat last night?"

"No. The night was close, and I thought we should be home before the storm broke. Why do you ask?"

"I observed that you are not wearing one now, and I feared lest the garment, if it were left behind, might be an excellent clue to your identity. However, as things are, I think we have left nothing behind us that might betray us."

As he spoke he went again to his saddlebags, and, thrusting a hand into one of them, he pulled out first a small brush, and then a handsome brown cloth coat.

"This brush will help you to get the mud from your breeches," he said, holding it out to Stephen. "Your boots do not matter. Then you might remove that blue coat of yours and try on this one I have here. I think 'twill fit you, for we are about a size. 'Tis a little creased, but 'tis well-nigh as fashionably cut as your own," he finished, with a twinkle in his eye.

"I' faith! you are a wonderful fellow, Ned," exclaimed Stephen admiringly. "See, the garment fits me like a glove. Have you got a similar change for yourself?"

"'Tis not necessary," replied Carless, smiling as he removed his coat and, to Stephen's intense astonishment, proceeded to turn it inside out. "My business clothes are specially made, and whereas this coat was but a moment ago

plum-color, you will observe that it is now olive green. I know of but one tailor in all England who has the knack of it, for 'tis a difficult matter, particularly in the collar and the revers. I owe that tailor much, Burgoyne, for his skill has saved me from the gallows more than once."

He folded up Stephen's discarded coat and placed it in the bag, and then, to his companion's further wonderment, took the pail of water, and with a second brush began to scrub vigorously at his horse's near hind fetlock.

"You are surely not going to wash down your mare now, Ned," he said incredulously.

"Not I," returned Carless, laughing as he continued his task. "But you will observe that her fetlocks are, like my coat, changing their hue, and that this one, from being all of a piece with the rest of her, is rapidly becoming white."

"Why, so it is!" agreed the wide-eyed Stephen.

"You see, Burgoyne, a horse is just as easily recognized as a man," pursued Carless, "and there are many whose bones moulder in the grave because they overlooked that fact. This mare was an unblemished bay when she came here; when she leaves she will have two white feet; and to-morrow her owner will ride a bay mare with four white feet and a blaze on her forehead."

"As you said, Ned, you neglect no precaution," said Stephen, lost in admiration of his companion's thoroughness. "And what of the horse that I am to ride? Is he disguised, too?"

"No. 'Tis unlikely that he was noticed. He was ridden by one of those who came up behind you. Now I think we are ready." He rose to his feet, and picked up the pail. "I will see if the coast is clear. Our hats and boots are our only weak spots, but we must of necessity take some risk."

He carried the pail outside, and brought it back empty in a moment or two.

"Now, Burgoyne, to horse. Ride as you do ordinarily, and if we encounter anyone on the road, go forward boldly, even though Crisp himself approach. And in the unlikely event of our being stopped and questioned, do not hesitate to give your correct name, and to say you ride for pleasure with your friend Ned Carless."

CHAPTER XI

TELLS HOW A CORINTHIAN DINED WITH A TINKER, A QUACK AND A THIEF

RIDING rapidly down the lane by which they had come, Stephen and his companion left the old barn behind them; but instead of turning off at the point at which they had previously left the moor and setting a straight course for Bolderburn as Stephen had expected, Carless, who was leading, continued along the lane until, after a winding progress of nearly two miles, it merged into the main highway.

Here Carless, holding up his hand, halted, and scanned the landscape to the southward with keen blue eyes. Apparently his scrutiny satisfied him, for after a moment or two he said, "Straight ahead, Burgoyne," and, crossing the road, put spurs to his horse and galloped forward over the open moor. Stephen followed at the best pace he could make, but he soon found that Ned's horse was considerably faster than his own, and the distance between them rapidly increased. For several miles they proceeded thus, and Stephen was at a loss to understand his companion's peculiar behavior.

But just as he was beginning to think that he would lose sight of Carless altogether, he saw the latter rein in his mount in the lee of a small cluster of trees.

"I' faith! Ned, you ride hard," he exclaimed, as he came abreast of the trees. "'Tis a chancey business galloping over rabbit warrens."

"Aye, but it was worth while to take the risk."

"But why did you leave me so far behind?" persisted Stephen.

"Because two horsemen riding wide apart are less noticeable than two riding together."

"True; I had not thought of it. Whither are we going, Ned?"

"To Bolderburn."

"Bolderburn?" echoed Stephen. "Surely this is not the way to Bolderburn?"

"It isn't. But methought it wiser to approach the village from a direction that will arouse no suspicion in the minds of Crisp or his men should they chance to see us. Hence the gallop, which I trust was not observed by anyone. Here we turn sharp to the left, and head straight for the road at a point approximating to that at which we contrived your rescue."

They moved forward again, this time towards the south, Carless setting the pace at an easy trot. He rode with seeming nonchalance, but his eyes were never still, and there was scarce a movement of either bird or beast within range of his vision that he failed to note.

"Think you not that this detour was unnecessary?" queried Stephen, after they had covered a mile or so. "I cannot see that there was much risk in our approaching Bolderburn direct. You bade Crisp and his men go forward and not back, and they will scarce have dared to disobey you."

"Neither you nor I know what Crisp has done since we left him," retorted Carless, a trifle sharply. "He is not quite the fool he appears to be, and he would give his ears to capture Black Dick. Thus if he chanced to see us return the way we went, although we were two instead of five, he would most certainly eye us more narrowly than accords with my ideas. And you forget that I had neither

paint nor mud on my face last night when I was taken prisoner."

"Not at all. Your quibble was reasonable on the face of things."

But Carless's remarks had dealt a shrewd blow at Stephen's confidence, which began to give place to an uneasiness which grew greater as they advanced. He gave only half his attention to the highwayman's tale of how he had, after escaping, pressed Alverford into his service, and, with no little difficulty, gathered together a few companions to help him to carry out his plans.

"It was touch and go," Carless was saying. "Had Crisp set out with you five minutes sooner, I fear the game had been lost. But what ails you, man? You are vastly morose of a sudden, methinks."

"I am worried, Ned," confessed Stephen. "It appears to me that you are risking too much for my sake. If, as you say, you wore no disguise last night, you must have been recognized then and there either by Crisp himself or by some other of those who were present when we were captured. It seems to me that——"

"Not so fast, sir, not so fast," cried the other, with a gay laugh. "You imagine that because I chance to be Squire of Worpleden everybody in Lancashire must know me. That is a delusion which most townsmen cherish! But remember that Darnchester, Crisp's headquarters, is over twenty miles from my home, and that since I returned from abroad I have perforce been something of a recluse. Consequently, I am not so familiar a figure to our enemies as you might suppose."

"But surely you are known to Colonel Oldfield?"

"By sight, yes. But fortunately he took but little notice of me; and, even though I lacked disguise, I had my wits with me. Look at me closely, Burgoyne," he concluded suddenly.

He turned his head, and Stephen saw a face so curiously

distorted that he could scarce believe that it was Carless who still rode with him. One eye was closed, and the other squinted diabolically. The mouth was twisted in a peculiar grimace which exposed the teeth at one side only, whilst the puckered wrinkles to which this gave rise added years to his companion's apparent age. Yet withal, the visage did not strike the observer as unnatural; its ugliness appeared to be that of malformation and not of distortion.

"Well, what think you of it?" asked Carless, without altering his grimace.

"I wouldn't have believed it possible," replied Stephen in wonderment. "Certainly I should never have recognized you."

"Nor will others, I hope." Carless resumed his natural expression. "'Tis a trick I learned years ago, and I have the knack of holding it for just as long as it pleases me. I assumed it the moment I was captured, and I think none saw me without it, or suspected it was assumed. Of course, Sir Randolph knows me, for I was my own natural self when he hired me to take his place, but I have a shrewd notion that he will think twice ere he betrays me."

"Yet I like it not," said Stephen uneasily. "Although the trick is perfect when one observes you full face, it may not be so effective in profile."

"We shall soon find out, anyway," said Carless grimly. "See you three horsemen away to our right? They are riding hard, eh? 'Tis our good friend Kellett and his brother man-hunters returning from their abortive chase of the elusive Dick. You'll note their black looks and the merciless way they flog their sweating mounts. They are in no good temper, I fear, Burgoyne. They'll test your theory, I'll warrant!"

Stephen, after a quick glance at the approaching rides, instinctively put spurs to his mount.

"Stop that!" called Carless peremptorily, as loudly as he

dared. "Are you mad, Burgoyne? Continue to ride as you were doing before, and pay them no attention."

"But can't you see that they intend to intercept us?" objected Stephen. "They have recognized us, of a certainty."

"There is nothing certain about it," retorted Carless sharply. "'Tis far more likely that they seek information from us. And if we try to evade them we shall certainly be courting disaster, for we may arouse in them suspicions which are not yet awake."

The wisdom of these remarks was patent, and Stephen promptly contrived an expression of nonchalant ease which the highwayman himself could not have bettered.

"Hi! You there! Halt!" Kellett's shout was both imperative and threatening. "I want a word with you two, d'you hear?"

Immediately the men addressed reined in their horses and awaited the oncoming riders.

"You are peremptory, my friend," remarked Carless icily to Kellett, as the officer and his followers came to a standstill. "The business that prompts you to address your betters in such a tone must be urgent indeed!"

"Urgent enough. 'Tis the King's business," growled Kellett surlily, but with his truculence evaporating before the other's supercilious demeanor.

"Indeed! Then I am not enamored of the King's choice of messengers." Carless's insolence convinced Kellett that he had to do with gentlemen of quality, and his aggressive manner changed to one of grudging respect.

"No offence, sir," he said. "I'm only doing my duty."

"Quite so," said Carless irritably; "but what do you want of me?"

"Well, sir, we're lookin' for a criminal, and I wondered if you or your friend had seed aught of him."

"What manner of man is he?"

"A big black-lookin' fellow ridin' a lame bay mare. From

what we knows of him, I thought he might ha' been goin' in th' direction you've come from."

Carless turned to his companion. "Do you recollect passing such a person, Burgoyne?" he asked indifferently.

"Can't say that I do," replied Stephen, stifling a yawn. "We've passed several horsemen, but I didn't notice any of 'em particularly."

"Nor I." Carless shifted in his saddle as though about to depart; then he frowned suddenly and appeared to be trying to recall something to his mind. "One moment though. Now I come to think of it, I fancy I saw a man who would answer to the description you give. Don't you remember a fellow in a plum-colored coat who passed us near the edge of the moor, Burgoyne? You remarked about the mare he was riding—an unblemished bay."

"Why, yes, so I do," said Stephen idly. "Fine mare she was, too."

"Was she lame, sir?" asked Kellett eagerly.

"No, I don't think so," replied Carless thoughtfully. "In fact, I'm sure she wasn't, for she was travelling like the wind."

Disappointment shadowed Kellett's face. "Then it couldn't ha' been 'im," he said gloomily.

"You are sure his mount was lame, then?" queried Carless nonchalantly.

"Well, we was told so for certain, sir."

"Hum! It strikes me as unlikely that a criminal would ride an unsound horse when his life might hang on the matter. Think you not that your fugitive may have been clever enough to deceive your informant? 'Tis a simple matter to make a horse limp. A bit of stick in the hoof would do it."

The light of comprehension, not unmixed with chagrin, dawned in Kellett's eyes, and he slapped his thigh. "By gum! but I believe you've hit it, sir," he cried. "Damn

him! he must have hidden hisself some'ow until we was out o' sight and then gone forward. 'Ow long is it sin' you saw him?"

"Just as long as it has taken us to ride from the edge of the moor to here," replied Carless. "He was headed for the main road north."

"Thank you kindly, sir." Kellett touched his hat and gathered up his reins. "Sorry to ha' troubled you, sir. Good day to you."

"Good day. I trust you will overtake your quarry, but you will have to ride hard to do it."

"Aye, hard indeed!" remarked Stephen drily, as soon as Kellett was out of earshot. "Methinks he will have to encircle the globe to do it if he keep on in his present direction."

Carless smiled, but his smile was one of relief rather than mirth. "I'm glad to see his back," he said. "I had qualms, Burgoyne, for that was the man who tied me up last night. But 'twas obvious that he suspected nothing."

"Aye. His haste would be less otherwise."

For some moments they rode in silence, each busy with his thoughts. But as they approached the road a voice hailed them, and Stephen, glancing in the direction from which it came, observed a thin column of smoke ascending into the still air from a fire which had been lighted in a little hollow in the lee of some gorse bushes. A few yards away from the fire stood a tinker's cart, and in the unharnessed donkey which browsed contentedly beside it Stephen recognized the sagacious Adam. The tinker himself stood close by, and was waving a beckoning hand.

" 'Fore gad! this is most unfortunate." Stephen frowned with vexation. " 'Tis the tinker who gave Crisp the information regarding Black Dick."

"What matter?" asked Carless, heading his horse towards the fire.

"Matter enough and to spare," retorted Stephen. "He is an astute fellow and will know me at a glance."

Carless laughed lightly. "You have naught to fear from William the tinker. He is more like to minister to your hunger than to deliver you to justice, and if your appetite be as keen as mine you are sharp set indeed."

"I' faith! I'm glad to hear it," said Stephen, with a sigh of relief. "Now you mention it, I have eaten nothing since breakfast."

"And I since last night," said Carless drily. "But William will remedy that, I'll warrant."

"Is he an acquaintance of yours?"

"He is more than that. Had it not been for him, I doubt if you would now be riding at my side. Well, William, what news?" he cried as, dismounting, he took the bit from his mare's mouth and left her to her own devices.

"No news as you ain't aware on, I reckon," said the tinker, his eyes a-twinkle. "I see as ye rescued the gent all right."

"That he did!" interjected Stephen, following his friend's example and turning his horse loose. "And both you and he have made me eternally your debtor."

"Nay, nay, sir," protested William. "As for Ned I can't say, but as for me, ye don't owe me nothink. Ye'll recolleck that little argyment as I 'ad wiv that 'ere young sprig o' the nobility, 'im as give me a testimonial, eh?"

"Indeed I do," replied Stephen, smiling.

"Well then, ye'll also recolleck as ye judged betwixt us and gave me the verdick. One good turn deserves another, I say, and our accounts is now square up to date."

"What have you got in the pot, William?" interposed Carless, gazing longingly at the cauldron which was suspended from a tripod over the fire.

"A br'iled chicken—done along o' two or three potaters, a carrot, and a bit o' onion," declared the tinker, smack-

ing his lips. "So sit ye down—that is, if this 'ere gent ain't too proud to eat wiv a tinker," he concluded diffidently, cocking an enquiring eye at Stephen.

The latter flushed uncomfortably. "On the contrary, I am deeply grateful for your hospitality, which is proffered at a most opportune moment. My hunger is keen, William, and 'twill need some appeasing, I promise you."

The gratified tinker, having seated his guests under the gorse bushes, handed to each of them a spoon, and a tin plate into which he ladled a considerable quantity of steaming and fragrant stew. Then he whistled softly, and, to Stephen's astonishment, there emerged from behind the bushes a man in whom he instantly recognized the clergyman who, earlier in the day, had been the victim o' Black Dick. But his clerical attire had given place to rougher garb, and his face—the pallor of which had not abated and which Stephen now concluded was natural—was alight with merriment.

"Another surprise for you, eh, Burgoyne?" smiled Carless. "Permit me to present to you Jeremiah Dodd, lately trooper in His Majesty's service, more lately still —though for a shorter period—a luminary of the Church."

Stephen laughed as he held out his hand to the newcomer. "You bubbled me as well as Crisp," he said. "I had no suspicion until this moment that the Reverend Mr. Willoughby was other than he represented himself to be. You are a clever actor, Mr. Dodd."

"I am Jerry to my friends, sir, if I may count you as one."

"Indeed you may. I——"

Jerry held up his hand. "Your dinner gets cold, and there is no need for honeyed words between friends," he said quietly. "The eyes speak more truthfully than the tongue, and what I see in yours makes protestations unnecessary."

As he spoke he picked up a plate which the tinker had

placed for him, and, helping himself from the bubbling pot, sat down by Stephen's side.

In what strange places and peculiar circumstances do we meet those chosen by Fate to mould our destinies! The people whom we come across in the ordinary social round are seldom those whose lot it is to make or mar our lives; much oftener is it the men and women encountered by what is called "Chance" who carry in their hands the keys that open for us the great gates of the way that leads to golden happiness or black despair. If for no other reason than this, it behoves us ever to treat all with whom we come in contact with courtesy and consideration. Courtesy costs nothing, apart from a little curbing of our own ill-humors, but it is always the seed of a bountiful harvest.

Had anyone, but a short week ago, told Stephen Burgoyne—Buck Burgoyne, Corinthian, leader of fashion, fine gentleman—that he would be glad to sit under a bush with a highwayman, a tinker, and an ex-trooper, and to eat stew with them from a tin plate with no other implements than his fingers and a spoon, he would have dubbed his informant imbecile. Yet here was he, enjoying his repast as he had not enjoyed a meal since his boyhood's days, and aglow with that feeling of pleasure which only the most perfectly congenial companionship can give. The Polite World would scarce have credited its own eyes could it have seen him thus, for what could the elegant Mr. Burgoyne have in common with such men as these? Yet to them he owed his liberty, his life, and his good name, and surely no man can be more heavily in debt than this.

"You are thoughtful, Burgoyne," said Carless presently.

"Aye, I have much to think about," agreed Stephen. "You did not tell me that even the parson was your ally, and it amazes me that you were able to call to your aid so large a company and to lay your plans with such thoroughness."

" 'Twas more by good luck than aught else," explained

Carless. "After leaving Lord Alverford I sought a good friend—one of those whom you have already seen—and when I explained my errand he saddled his horse without quibble and set out with me. Our plans were as indeterminate as moonshine, and we stopped at the inn in the hope that a tankard of ale would lubricate the cogs of our brains as well as our throats. There, as luck would have it, we found two men who are beholden to me, and after some discussion they, though somewhat reluctantly, agreed to join us. We at length decided that our only course was to attempt your rescue by force, but I was not enamored of the prospect, for I had none too much faith in the wholeheartedness of my two latest recruits. So we set out again, and on the road met William here and his friend Jerry. The sight of them gave me the idea of attempting to split up Crisp's party, and within five minutes the little scene you saw enacted had been planned. Jerry has a fertile brain within that hard head of his."

"Where did he get his parson's clothes?" asked Stephen curiously.

"From a little store that I keep not many miles from here," replied Carless, with a smile. "I had not far to go, else I dared not have risked it, for time pressed."

"And what will happen when Crisp finds that he has been duped—for he will surely discover that the parson is non-existent?" asked Stephen seriously. "Methinks it may go hard with William and Jerry if that be so, and William, at least, can easily be found."

"You don't quite grasp the good Crisp's methods, Burgoyne," said Carless easily. "It seems to me that your fears are groundless, for I know Crisp of old. Having failed to capture Black Dick, why should he seek the parson? To do so would be to force him to confess his own incompetence, and to lay himself open to censure and perhaps dismissal. That is how Crisp will argue the matter, and you may rest assured that our friends here are in no danger."

"That is good hearing," said Stephen fervently. "I should be vastly sorry to learn that they had done themselves an ill turn in doing me a good one."

Carless's jovial expression changed suddenly and became hard and stern. "You take the matter too much to yourself," he said, somewhat coldly. "The motive for my actions was not entirely benevolent, and had I not had a debt to pay on my own account I doubt if I should have concerned myself unduly on yours. My object is to get even with Sir Randolph Gorst, and in rescuing you I helped towards that end. I am a highwayman, Burgoyne, not a knight-errant, and 'twill please me better if you will keep that fact fixed firmly in your mind."

Chilled by his unexpected rebuff, and not a little inclined to take umbrage at it, Stephen continued his meal in silence; but as he munched his food his anger gradually cooled, and he remembered only the great service which had been rendered him.

This highwayman was a strange fellow, without a doubt. Watching him as he ate, Stephen noted that his eyes never rested. Their keen glance swept the open heath in constant search, and ever and anon he turned his head and peered through the bushes which hid them from the view of the users of the road. His joviality had given place to a gloom which became him ill, and which made him look careworn and old. Stephen could scarce believe that this was the careless, happy-go-lucky fellow who had been such a delightful companion, and he marvelled that a chance word of his own could have wrought such a change.

At length Carless threw aside his plate and rose abruptly to his feet. With a curt order to William to follow him, he strode away towards a little mound which stood about fifty yards from the fire—evidently with the intention of procuring a more comprehensive view of the surrounding country before getting to horse again.

Jerry smiled whimsically as he watched the retreating

figures. "A rum pair, aren't they?" he said. "William's a rum 'un, but Ned's a rummer."

"So 'twould seem," agreed Stephen. "What was it I said that plunged him in gloom so suddenly?"

"God knows!" returned Jerry. "Ned's a law unto himself—blithe as a cricket one minute, and miserable as a half-drowned cat the next. I don't think it was aught you said that upset him. There's no accounting for his moods, and the black dog jumps on to his shoulders at the most unlikely moments."

"You know him well, then?"

"Fairly so," said Jerry evasively. "Say well enough to guess that his complaint is the same as yours."

"The same as mine!" echoed Stephen, in amazement. "And pray what may that be?"

"You're both in love, Mr. Burgoyne," said Jerry, with placid confidence.

Stephen flushed with annoyance. "You presume too far, sir," he said coldly. "That I am deeply in your debt I grant, but my indebtedness does not permit you to poke your nose into my private affairs. You will be well advised to keep a still tongue about matters which don't concern you."

"I speak what I please to whom I please," retorted the ex-trooper calmly. "I say again that you are in love."

"Damn your insolence!" cried Stephen angrily, seizing the riding-whip that lay on the grass at his side and leaping up impulsively. "Say another word and I'll thrash you soundly!"

"That were beyond your powers, sir," declared the other coolly, also rising to his feet as he spoke.

Such a remark was all that was needed to fan the smouldering embers of Stephen's wrath into flame, and he struck at the impudent fellow with all his force. But his blow never reached its object. His descending wrist was caught with amazing dexterity in a vice-like grip, which gradually

tightened until the whip dropped harmlessly from his nerveless fingers. It seemed to him that the bones would inevitably be crushed to pulp; a mist swam before his eyes, but just as he felt that he must scream with the agony of it, the awful grip relaxed, and he found himself staring stupidly at his benumbed right hand. A quizzical voice spoke gently and chidingly in his ear.

"Come, sir, come; never lose your temper over trifles. An even temper will carry you almost anywhere, but a quick temper, ill-controlled, will strew your path with all manner of obstacles, and lead you into every kind of unpleasantness."

"But you were insolent," persisted Stephen obstinately, nursing his throbbing wrist.

"Not I. I did but speak the truth, and truth, though 'tis not always pleasant hearing, ought never to earn a thrashing for its teller. Tomorrow you will laugh at yourself for taking offence at naught, and laughter is the panacea for all ills. So why not laugh now, as I do?"

And, suiting the action to the word, Jerry put back his head and gave vent to a peal of laughter for which there was no apparent cause, but which was so hearty, so merry, so infectious that, despite himself, Stephen found it impossible to keep the smile from his lips.

"Ah! that's better, Mr. Burgoyne," said Jerry approvingly, resuming his seat and taking from his pocket a short and blackened clay pipe. "You bear no malice, I trust."

"None," declared Stephen, looking slightly ashamed of himself. "I apologize for losing my temper; it was unwarrantable."

"Methinks Ned was really to blame," opined Jerry shrewdly. "And love is very trying to a man's temper. We have seen that twice in the last ten minutes."

"But I am not in love," declared Stephen, with somewhat unnecessary emphasis.

His companion smiled incredulously. "'Tis useless to

try to deceive me, sir," he said. "I know the symptoms too well, for it is part of my trade to recognize these things at a glance."

"And what is your trade?"

"Why, there are some who call me physician, some who dub me quack, and many who cry me knave. In short, since leaving the Army I am become a professor of the great science of medicine, a healer of human ills—not perhaps unduly burdened with qualifications or book-learning, but possessing a knowledge of mankind that stands me in excellent stead. At certain times of the year I go from town to town, attending at fairs, markets, or other gatherings at which I may turn an honest penny. I sell pills that will cure all known internal complaints, from colds to colic; a liniment which, applied to the affected parts, will ease every pain, from gout to toothache; and a magic love-potion which is never known to fail, no matter whether it be taken by man or maid."

"You must be a very clever man."

"No, sir, not clever; merely observant."

"How can that be? Surely 'twas not merely observation that enabled you to concoct that infallible pill?"

"Certainly it was, sir. For, look you, my pill contains naught but soap and breadcrumbs coated on the outside with bitter aloes."

"And do you mean to say that people are such fools as to think they derive benefit from it?"

"Aye, that I do. They buy 'em by the gross, and still come back for more. 'Tis just this way, sir. If I can persuade the people that my remedy will cure them, the battle is more than half won; and after taking the pills their faith does the rest, and they are well again. The pill itself is of little value, but I heal their minds by my speech, and the body is the slave of the mind. My power lies in my tongue and not in my pill, for the former endows the latter with a virtue which of itself it lacks. My words

are soothing to the nerves, and my pill is bitter to the taste; human nature demands that medicine shall affront the palate, and if it be sweet the patient loses faith in its efficacy. Hence I make it bitter."

"And what of the liniment?" asked Stephen laughing.

"'Tis exactly the same with that. It is water in which has been boiled an evil-smelling herb, for just as folk like their physic to be nasty, they like their liniment to offend their noses. Here, however, my tongue has an ally. I tell my customers that the stuff must be well rubbed in, and rubbing always helps to allay muscular pains or stiffness. You see, sir, folks won't rub unless they have something which tempts 'em to rub, and my liniment does that."

"Methinks you have studied human nature to some purpose! But how does your theory work in relation to the love-potion? I cannot conceive that anything you may say as to its merits can influence any but the actual purchaser, and in nine cases out of ten the potion must be intended to be given to someone who is not of your audience."

"Ah, there we deal with another side of the question. My potion is of small measure, prettily colored and pleasant to the taste, as a love-potion should be. If a man buys it and asks a maid to drink it for his sake, she knows at once that he is enamored of her, and, as love does more often than not breed love, my magic liquid has every chance of success. And if a maid cajoles a man in like manner, his vanity is flattered by the attention, and the very arts she uses in the accomplishment of her delicate task may open his stupid masculine eyes to her desires and her charms—and behold! the potion has worked and love has another victim!"

"In sooth, you are the very prince of charlatans, Jerry! But I'll wager 'twas not the profession of medicine that gave you such abnormal strength," said Stephen, with a rueful glance at his wrist.

"No, the Army did that for me," smiled Jerry. "But I see that Ned and William have finished their confab and

are returning. Can I not sell you a bottle of my love-potion ere they arrive? I have some in my pack yonder, and believe me, sir, there is no more effective way of declaring your passion than through its medium."

"'Tis useless to me, I fear," said Stephen, coloring slightly. "Fortunately I chance to be heart-whole."

The erstwhile trooper shook his head and smiled knowingly. "Perhaps you think so now, but you are wrong, Mr. Burgoyne," he said sagely. "I encounter love too often to be deceived. So if at any time you need my magic mixture, remember that Jerry Dodd is to be found at most places hereabouts where there may be a fair in progress, and, in any case, we are bound to meet again ere long."

CHAPTER XII

WHEREIN CARLESS TAKES PRECAUTIONS AND STEPHEN MAKES A VOW

THE Nag's Head, bathed in the afternoon sunshine, presented its wonted peaceful aspect as Carless and Stephen trotted slowly towards it. Even the taciturn Mr. Jack Hindle, he of the canary-colored waistcoat and the silky whiskers, occupied his usual position against the gatepost at the entrance to the inn yard, with the inevitable straw turning between his lips. A gleam of interest appeared in his eyes as they fell upon the approaching horsemen, and as the latter drew rein in front of him he actually spat out his straw and forgot to replace it by another one.

"You were wrong about the weather, you see, Jack," remarked Carless pleasantly, as he dismounted.

Jack opened his eyes wide, and stared at him in an aggrieved fashion. "Never wrong about th' weather," he objected, with more heat than Stephen had hitherto seen him show.

"Yet you were mistaken this time," insisted Carless suavely. "You will remember that when Mr. Burgoyne and I set out on our ride this morning you ventured the opinion that the sunshine would be gone before noon."

Jack gulped, looked at the mystified Stephen, gulped again, and then, staring harder than ever at Carless, said:

"Did I?"

"You did," said Carless emphatically, returning Jack's stare with hard, cold eyes. "Is your father in the house?"

"Aye."

"Then I'll go in. Give the mare a drink but naught else. By the way, what time was it when we started out for Mansford this morning? About nine o'clock, wasn't it?"

The taciturn one stroked his whiskers, rubbed his chin, and scratched his head; then he suddenly grinned broadly, and winked his left eye.

"Nine to th' minute!" he said positively.

"I thought so," said Carless, looking at him significantly. "Don't forget that, Jack, if anybody should ask you."

Jack winked again without replying, and, taking the two bridles, led the horses away.

"That makes one unshakable witness," said Carless, in a satisfied undertone, as Stephen and he entered the inn. "Jack will not forget one word that I have said, and will be ready to take oath that you and I left here for Mansford at nine o'clock this morning."

"Your object is to establish an alibi for me, I take it," observed Stephen.

"For both of us," corrected Carless—somewhat curtly, Stephen thought. "I propose now to enlist the services of Jack's parents also to that end, if it be possible."

He passed by the doors of the public rooms without a glance, and, Stephen following, unceremoniously entered the large and comfortable kitchen with the air of one privileged beyond the ordinary customer of the inn.

This being the time of day when trade was slackest, the landlord sat dozing before the open fireplace, with his slippered feet on the fender. A huge red and yellow bandana handkerchief covered his head and face; but as his guests entered, the noise of the opening door disturbed him, and he removed the handkerchief and yawned prodigiously. But as he did so his gaze fell upon the two men, and the somnolence in his eyes gave place to astonishment.

"Why, hang me if it isn't Mr. Burgoyne!" he cried.

"I thought you must ha' gone for good, sir, though I couldn't understand why you'd said nowt about it."

Before Stephen could reply, Carless stepped forward and said quickly: "Time enough for Mr. Burgoyne to explain that later, Tom. I've a word or two to say, and you'll be doing me a favor if you'll listen carefully. Mr. Burgoyne slept here last night," he concluded abruptly, making the assertion in the tone of one who knows that his words cannot be denied.

"That he didn't!" Hindle shook his head emphatically. "Mr. Burgoyne went out early in th' evening, and——"

"I tell you he slept here last night, and don't you forget it," interrupted Carless, with equal and far grimmer emphasis.

The landlord rose from his chair, and, taking a long clay pipe from the mantlepiece, stood with it in his hand surveying his guests steadily and gravely.

"I didn't know as you were friendly wi' Mr. Burgoyne, Ned," he said at last, with apparent irrevelance. "Are you birds of a feather, like?"

Carless's face flushed a dull, dark red. "That's none of your business," he said surlily, flinging himself into a chair.

The landlord smiled and lit his pipe. "Isn't it?" he said quietly, puffing a huge cloud of smoke into the air. "'Just as you like, lad. But if it's none o' my business, then happen Mr. Burgoyne'll make it convenient to find some other inn."

"'Fore gad! landlord, surely you are taking offence at naught," protested Stephen, angered and amazed by Hindle's attitude. "I cannot——"

"Damn it, man, will you hold your tongue?" cried Carless irritably. "I'll deal with Tom. He's a pig-headed old fool, and can't see beyond the end of his ugly nose. Does Mr. Burgoyne look like a wrong 'un, you doddering idiot?"

He almost shouted the question, and his eyes and face were aflame with passion.

Not one whit disturbed by his interlocutor's rudeness, the landlord surveyed Stephen keenly from top to toe before replying. "No, I can't say as he does," he said slowly at last.

"Of course he doesn't," said Carless impatiently. "And what's more, he isn't. I'll vouch for that. But we're in a hole, Tom, and we want your help."

"Oh, do you now?" said Hindle drily. "Well, all I can say is that you've a rum way o' seeking favors, Ned, my lad."

"Aye. I'm a hot-tempered fool," agreed Carless, passing his hand wearily over his forehead and sighing. "I'll explain as far as I can, Tom. Through no fault of our own, Mr. Burgoyne and I got into a serious scrape last night and had some trouble to get out of it. I think the danger is past; but one never knows, and I want you to promise that, if anyone enquire of you, you will say that Mr. Burgoyne occupied his bed here last night and all night."

"You say that you weren't at fault?" The landlord looked dubious.

"I give you my word," said Carless earnestly. "A traitorous dog turned a frolic into something approaching a tragedy, and we are guiltless of aught save folly. You believe me?"

"Aye, I believe you," said the landlord simply. "I've never yet had cause to doubt your word, Ned."

"And you will do as I ask?"

"That will he; I'll see to that," said a hearty feminine voice, as a round little woman with a round red face entered the room. "I've heard all as you've said, Ned, and it's enough. There's no need to tell aught as you don't think wise. Folks makes out as it's th' women as is inquisitive, but I reckon they never met suchlike as Tom"—and Mrs. Hindle gazed scornfully at her crestfallen spouse.

"You're a treasure, Martha," cried Carless, seizing her round her plump waist and kissing her soundly. "Mr. Burgoyne and I left here for Mansford about nine this morning, didn't we?"

"That you did, you wicked lad," said Martha, her eyes a-twinkle. "And much ado I had to get Mr. Burgoyne up in time, hadn't I, sir?"

"I fear you had," laughed Stephen. "I sleep a thought heavily."

But Carless was in no mood for pleasantries. "That's settled then," he said brusquely. "'Tis time I was off. Good day to you, Martha, and for my sake see that Tom keeps his wits about him. Pray accompany me to the door, Burgoyne; I should like another word with you."

He walked swiftly down the passage and out into the open air, where he stopped and turned to his companion. "Remember what I said, Burgoyne," he remarked weightily. "Change your clothes and go immediately to pay your respects to Lady Alverford."

"Your advice is little to my liking," said Stephen doubtfully. "Methinks 'twere wiser to keep close for a day or two until the hue and cry has died down."

"You are not skilled in the game of hide and seek, I fear," sneered Carless. "To keep close, as you call it, is to advertise to the world that you have something to hide. My belief is that the boldest course is usually the safest, and that belief has enabled me to cheat the hangman more than once. So you will call upon Lady Alverford without delay. Farewell. You shall hear from me later." And, without giving Stephen time to reply, he turned on his heel towards the stable yard, and within a minute was cantering away down the road.

Left alone, Stephen watched his retreating figure until it disappeared from view; then, with a sigh, he turned into the inn and went straight to his bedroom. He was weary, both of mind and body, and would fain have rested. Fur-

thermore, he was irritated by his late companion's peculiar change of mood, and resented the authoritative—almost commanding—tone in which he proffered his advice. Stephen Burgoyne was unused to receiving orders from anyone, and liked the experience but little; yet he recognized the soundness of the highwayman's counsel, and, without hesitation, he set about making his toilet in preparation for his call on Lady Alverford.

Had he been less preoccupied, he might have observed that, when Carless took leave of him, a woman's face was pressed close against one of the small panes of glass in the coffee-room window, and that a pair of bright eyes was watching him intently and without any attempt at concealment. But he was in the throes of introspection, and was oblivious to everything around him.

And the same eyes watched him again, as, once more immaculately clad, he set out to walk to the Gables, and to judge by their expression their owner was ill-pleased that he had thought fit to wander abroad again so soon.

As Stephen passed through the massive gates which gave access to Lord Alverford's grounds, he halted suddenly to avoid collision with a gentleman who was in very obvious haste.

"'Fore gad, Harry! you nearly ran me down," he exclaimed, as the other stopped abruptly. "You are in a vast hurry, methinks."

Immediately Lord Alverford began to behave in a most astonishing way. He capered like a clown, seized Stephen by the shoulders and shook him vigorously, then took his hand in his own and worked it up and down as though it were a pump handle, after which he stood back and gazed at his friend in incredulous delight.

"Burn me and blister me, Steve! I can scarce believe my own eyes," he cried at last. "Ya are free? D'ya mean to tell me ya are actually free, what?"

"Yes. I'm free—for the time being, anyway," smiled Stephen.

"And how did ya manage it? 'Pon my soul and honor, 'tis incredible," breathed Harry. And without giving Stephen time to reply he continued:

"I was at my wits' end when I saw ya ride away this morning a prisoner, b'jove. It seemed impossible that ya could bubble seven of 'em; odds too long, even counting that highwayman fellow on your side, what? I'm not much good at plotting and planning, as ya know, and after I'd had my lunch I'd almost decided to seek advice on the matter when I heard a rumor that ya had escaped. That was about an hour ago, but just then my lady mother started off on one of her lectures, and I had to wait until she had finished. And most cursed windy she was, b'jove," he complained, with a sigh.

"You were on your way to the Nag's Head, I suppose?"

"Yes. I couldn't credit the rumor, and I was off to make enquiries for myself."

"And may I ask whose advice you had thought of seeking on my behalf?"

Harry colored to the bright hue of a peony. "Well—er—paint me and powder me if I hadn't thought of taking—that is, you know—of speaking to Miss—er—Miss Ravenscourt about it," he stammered.

Stephen smiled inwardly, but raised his eyebrows in pretended surprise. "Miss Ravenscourt!" he echoed. "How could she have helped? 'Tis unwise to trust secrets to the opposite sex, and anyway she is only a chit of a girl."

"Let me tell you she's a doocid clever woman," cried Harry hotly. "And as for trusting her with secrets—why, I'd trust her with—er—with—er——"

"Shall we say, your name?" suggested Stephen slyly—to his friend's unbounded confusion. "Doubtless she is all that you think her, Harry, and that would appear to be high

praise indeed, eh? Yet I should feel happier if you refrained from confiding in her—at all events for the present."

"Very well," consented Harry—not very readily, however. "Were ya coming to see me, Steve?"

"No. I am going to call on Lady Alverford."

"My mother!" Harry eyed his friend with profound admiration. " 'Pon my soul and honor, ya are a bold fellow! She'll give ya the sharp edge of her tongue, for she is mightily offended that ya haven't called sooner."

"Humph! Well, you know the reason for that, Harry. However, I must invent some plausible excuse for my seeming neglect."

Harry shook his head dubiously. "Ya'll not find that an easy task," he said. "My mother is doocid difficult to deceive, b'jove. She'll smell a rat as sure as fate, and if she does, she'll never rest until she's ferreted it out."

The two men turned off the main drive on to a by-path that offered a short cut to the house; and a minute or two later the rumble and grind of wheels told them that a carriage was being driven rapidly along the road which they had left. They turned abruptly, but the vehicle was hidden from their gaze by the undergrowth of the wood through which they were walking, and they were forced to proceed on their way with their curiosity ungratified.

"Methought that sounded like a carriage, Harry," said Stephen uneasily.

"So it did," agreed Harry. "Somebody else going to call on my mother, I should say."

"Who it is likely to be, do you think?"

"Dunno." Harry yawned. "Perhaps the parson—though he usually walks, now I come to think of it. But it might be any one of fifty people, b'jove, for my mother is a bit of a personage hereabouts."

"Are her visitors likely to arrive before we do?"

"They'll beat us by a few minutes. Why do ya ask?"

"Oh, I was only thinking that I should have preferred

Lady Alverford to be alone."

"Alone? Gad! ya ought to thank ya stars that she won't be alone, for 'twill save ya some plaguey awkward explanations if I am any judge."

Stephen did not pursue the subject. The sound of the passing carriage had awakened in his mind the fear that the day's adventures were not yet over; and the thought that the vehicle might possibly be carrying Colonel Oldfield or his niece filled him with trepidation. If one or both of them should be with Lady Alverford when he put in an appearance, the situation would be appallingly difficult, and it seemed to him that it might even become fraught with danger. Yet his pride forbade him to draw back now. Indeed, it would be folly to do so; his very audacity might be his salvation, and save him from the recognition he feared. In it he must trust, for he was determined to pursue the matter to the bitter end, regardless of the consequences.

And his worst fears were realized when he preceded Harry into Lady Alverford's drawing-room. Averill sat facing him as he entered, and her eyes rested on him with a puzzled look of enquiry as he advanced to pay his respects to his hostess. The smile which was playing about the piquant face of Miss Sylvia Ravenscourt faded of a moment as her gaze sought his—only to break again in a significance which, fortunately for Stephen's peace of mind, he failed to observe; whilst Colonel Oldfield, who was standing with his back to the fireplace and his hands under his coat-tails, regarded him with staring eyes which matched a gaping mouth and gave to their owner a marked and ludicrous resemblance to a codfish.

The intense embarrassment which Stephen felt, but which was hidden from his beholders by a cool air of assurance which did him credit, was not lessened by Lady Alverford's greeting. It was cold and formal, and not at all in accordance with the welcome that, despite Harry's warning, he had expected from one who, in the past, had always shown

pleasure in his society, and who had led him to believe that she had more than a little affection for him. He could not credit that her frigidity was due to the trivial offence of which Harry had spoken; his sin went deeper than that, and as she, with undisguised reluctance, presented him to each of her guests in turn, he racked his brains in a futile endeavor to find the key to her change of attitude.

Had he been told the true reason for her displeasure he would have been surprised beyond measure. It was Lady Alverford's dearest wish that her son should marry Lady Averill Stapleton, and the arrival in the neighborhood of so markedly eligible a bachelor as Stephen Burgoyne was little to her liking. She was a shrewd woman, and she was fully alive to Harry's indifferent merits as a suitor. She knew that it was unlikely that he might capture the heart and hand of such a clever, discerning young woman as Averill without long and assiduous wooing. His shortcomings were fairly obvious, even to a mother, and those shortcomings would be infinitely more apparent in comparison with the more dashing and attractive qualities of other gallants. Thus it was her object to keep the field clear for him. If she were successful in this, she imagined that Averill would eventually succumb to Harry's persistent devotion, and she adopted towards Stephen her attitude of cold formality in the hope that it might help to induce him to depart for London with as little delay as possible.

So, having done her duty as a hostess in making him known to her guests, she gave him her shoulder and entered into subdued conversation with the Colonel.

His nerves on edge, and heartily wishing himself anywhere but here, Stephen turned in hopeful expectation of finding Harry at his elbow. But in this he was disappointed. His friend was standing with Miss Ravenscourt at the far side of the large apartment gazing into a cabinet which was filled with curios, and it was evident from his eager face

and his obliviousness to everything but his charming companion that Stephen might expect no aid from him.

Thus he had no choice but to devote himself to Averill. In other circumstances such an opportunity would have given him unalloyed pleasure, but, as it was, his instinct warned him that all was not well, and that he would have to step warily as a cat.

Nor was Averill's manner reassuring. Her eyes met his with a calm scrutiny which he had some difficulty in sustaining, and although she moved her skirts so that he might seat himself on the settee at her side, the action revealed no friendliness, but conveyed the impression that its motive was merely politeness.

She answered his conventional remarks with monosyllables, and evinced not the faintest trace of interest in anything he said. This irritated him. Here was he almost *tête-à-tête* with the woman who was the unwitting cause of his recent misfortunes and with whom he had longed to become formally acquainted, and, she was showing him very plainly that he bored her! 'Fore gad! but he would rouse her interest somehow before he left that house, even though he once again made a fool of himself in so doing. Also, no matter what it cost him, he would find out if she had any suspicion that he was one with the prisoner to whom she had been so kind. Discretion warned him that the course he proposed to pursue was a dangerous one; but his temper, tried almost beyond endurance by the mishaps of the past twenty-four hours, was beginning to fray, and he threw discretion to the winds.

"You are distrait, madam," he said at last, in a somewhat insolent tone. "You must forgive me if my poor efforts to entertain you are not to your liking."

A spark of anger kindled in Averill's eyes, and she flushed slightly. "It would seem that we have naught in common, sir," she said icily.

"That I can scarce believe," returned Stephen, with a

tolerant smile that made the spark of anger glow still brighter. "People of intelligence invariably have something in common, and, unless your looks belie you, your intellect matches mine."

Averill could hardly believe her ears. Never since she left the schoolroom had anyone, apart from her uncle, ventured to take her to task about anything, yet here was a perfect stranger—a man!—admonishing her as he might have admonished a refractory child. Her anger was now a flame that blazed in eyes and cheeks, and Stephen smiled inwardly as he noted it.

"You flatter me, sir," she said cuttingly. "If your intellect be on a par with your insolence, then you flatter me far beyond my merits."

"You think me insolent?" he asked pleasantly.

"Insolent and boorish," she replied succinctly.

"I am vastly unfortunate, methinks," he sighed. "Think you not that you judge me over harshly on so short an acquaintance, madam? You surely would not so hopelessly condemn a man within ten minutes of your first seeing him."

She smiled satirically. "A woman does not require half that time in which to form a reliable estimate of a man," she retorted. "Besides, an I am not mistaken, this is not the only occasion on which I have seen you," she added, eyeing him narrowly.

"No? Then we have met before, you think?" he queried lightly, giving no sign of the uneasiness which her retort caused him.

"We did not meet on the occasion of which I speak, sir," she replied coldly. "You passed me on the road two or three days ago, and from the way you eyed me I should scarce have thought that you would have forgotten me so soon."

"My memory is not at fault, madam; it had indeed been a poor one else. But it hadn't occurred to me that you might recollect the incident."

"Nor should I have done so had it not been for your unmannerly stare," she said quickly. "May I ask if you eye in that manner every woman you meet?"

"I do not, madam." Stephen smiled easily. "Such beauty as yours I encounter but seldom, and, as a rule, I fear I am blind to the charms of your sex."

"And 'twill please me well if you are blind to mine also," she said acidly. "Your admiration is as little to my liking as your conversation, Mr. Burgoyne."

"Then I am unfortunate indeed, madam," said Stephen, apparently unmoved. "I err on one occasion with my eyes, on a second with my tongue. Well, I can only offer you my humble apologies and beg forgiveness for my sins. Tell me that I do not beg in vain, madam."

She made no reply, but her lips curled disdainfully. Stephen still lacked the information he sought, and her face told him nothing, although her hostility made him fear the worst.

"You are silent, madam," he said, with mock reproach. " 'Twould seem my sins are even greater than I had thought. Surely it cannot be that I have erred on yet a third occasion?"

A slow, inscrutable smile spread over Averill's face—a smile which might have meant anything or nothing. It gave Stephen no comfort, nor did the reply which it accompanied.

"An uneasy conscience is an unenviable possession," she said, with apparent irrelevance. "Let it suffice you to learn that a woman never forgives the sins of those whom she dislikes; and spare me further words, sir."

Stephen's face darkened, and his lips came together in a hard, straight line. "As you will, madam," he said, in tones which matched the steely glint in his narrowed eyes. "But before I relieve you of my irksome society, hear me make a vow. You will forget both my sins and your dislike of me ere the harvest moon has reached her zenith. You hear?"

"Aye, I hear." She smiled contemptuously. "'Tis a man's vow, and the vows of men are mostly wasted breath."

"Think you so?" He rose to his feet and stood looking down at her. "Well, think as you please, madam; your views are unimportant. 'Twill be as I say—nay, 'twill be far more than that. I will make you regard my sins as virtues; I will transform your dislike into love. Into love, madam; remember that."

He did not give her time to reply, but turning sharply on his heel, he strode across the room to take his leave of his hostess.

Averill watched him go with incredulous eyes. Probably she was, at the moment, incapable of speech, for she was even too astounded to be angry. She sat like one in a dream whilst Stephen said farewell to Lady Alverford, failing even to note that the latter did not invite her departing guest to repeat his visit. She saw the frown on her uncle's brow and the almost imperceptible nod with which he acknowledged Stephen's bow, but their significance was entirely lost on her.

Only when Stephen kissed Sylvia Ravenscourt's dainty fingers did her mind begin to function properly. For Sylvia was cordially expressing her pleasure at having met Mr. Burgoyne, and trusting that the acquaintance would be renewed at an early date.

"Ya need have no fear of that, Miss Ravenscourt," interposed Harry, with a laugh. "If ya'll permit me, I'll bring Steve with me tomorrow when I come to teach ya to throw a fly, what?"

"I shall be charmed," said Sylvia, bestowing a bewitching smile on both men impartially. "And I am sure that Averill will, too, for 'tis seldom one meets such pleasant and congenial company so far from town."

Averill turned a stony face towards her friend. "Please speak for yourself, Sylvia," she said, in clear, cold tones which commanded the attention of everyone in the room.

"Town gallants, Corinthians, macaronies, bang-up bloods, and all the other fops who rejoice in similar charming titles do not appeal to me; I prefer men. That is why I only visit London when I am compelled. Therefore I fancy that Mr. Burgoyne—or Buck Burgoyne, as his admirers call him—would find little to amuse him at Oldfield Grange. Besides, he will no doubt be returning to his usual haunts ere long; there can be nothing to tempt him to prolong his visit to a barbarous county like Lancashire."

If she had intended to astonish her hearers, she certainly succeeded. Sylvia bit her lips and tossed her head in petulant anger; Colonel Oldfield scratched the lobe of his ear in perplexity; and Lady Alverford frowned, for she considered that Averill was guilty of a grave breach of etiquette—in addition to which she resented a speech which reflected quite as much on her son as it did on Stephen. Harry's indignation showed plain in his frank face, and he would have instantly taken up the cudgels in defence of his friend had not Stephen, who was the only one who evinced no sign of either embarrassment or displeasure, stopped him with a gesture.

"Permit me to inform you that you are mistaken, Lady Averill," said Stephen, his eyes fixed unwaveringly upon hers. "I find your county of Lancashire delightful, and its inhabitants both charming and interesting. Their manners are refreshing to a jaded Londoner; and although their ideas of hospitality seem peculiar, yet they are doubtless sound. Thus I propose to linger here awhile that I may study them further. In the meantime, permit me to wish you all a very good day."

CHAPTER XIII

RENDERS STEPHEN'S VOW VASTLY DIFFICULT OF REDEMPTION

THE end of the week that followed his disastrous call on Lady Alverford found Stephen inclined to regret his avowed determination to stay in Lancashire. The time hung heavily on his hands, for Harry, attracted to Oldfield Grange like a moth to a candle, had little time to spare for his friend, but danced attendance on Miss Sylvia Ravenscourt until Colonel Oldfield, upon whose temper Harry had a most deplorable effect, was well-nigh demented.

The hue and cry which Stephen had fully expected would follow his escape failed to materialize; at all events, he had observed nothing in the demeanor of those with whom he came in daily contact which might lead him to suppose that he was an object of suspicion. Nor had he seen anything of Crisp or his satellites; if those worthies were pursuing the ends of the law, their pursuit evidently did not lead them in the direction of the Nag's Head at Bolderburn.

Strangely enough, this did not altogether please him. Subconsciously, he had looked forward to pitting his wits against those of the keepers of the King's peace, and the dangers of his position had thrilled rather than alarmed him. But as nothing happened to disturb the even tenor of his ways, he at length came to the conclusion that he had seen the last of the affair, and set about the onerous task of finding something to amuse him in a tiny village to whose inhabitants he was a complete stranger.

Yet had he known the High Constable a little more intimately he might have felt less secure. Mr. Crisp, though

inclined to cowardice, was no fool; and his failure to bring his prisoner to justice had obtained him severe censure which rankled in his mind and made him register a solemn vow that he would either effect a recapture or else retire from a service which regarded him with such disfavor. But he was too wily to advertise his designs; and there was not a soul in Bolderburn who suspected that the new ostler at the Crown, the hostelry that was the Nag's Head only competitor, was one of the High Constable's most trusted lieutenants.

This man spent more time in and around the Nag's Head than appeared becoming in the servant of a rival house, but Stephen had not even noticed him. The victim of a boredom which was the outcome of what he inwardly termed his own mulish folly, Stephen was only too glad when night came and gave him the society of the villagers. Each evening found him in the snug bar-parlor in the company of the Hindles, father and son, and those of their customers who were most privileged.

He found much to interest him in these men who moved and had their being in a sphere of life so far removed from his own, and, after their mutual shyness had been dissipated, he was surprised and pleased to find that he had much in common with them. They were sportsmen to a man; they talked of prize-fighting, dogs, horses, shooting, and hunting as keenly as they discussed the prospects of the harvest or the condition of their cattle, and Stephen joined wholeheartedly in their conversations. At first, their ingrained distrust of strangers made them suspicious of his motives; but after two or three nights in his company they forgot their suspicions, and began to treat him with the respect which they considered the just due of one who was undoubtedly an authority on everything pertaining to sport of all kinds.

But the daylight found the villagers engrossed in the unending task of earning their daily bread, and Stephen had

perforce to cast about him further in order to combat his ennui. He explored the countryside in almost every direction both on horseback and afoot, but its appealing beauty lost nine-tenths of its charm by his lack of a companion with whom to share it.

He had been further irritated by his failure to find any trace of Sir Randolph Gorst. Enquiry at the latter's house had elicited the reply that Gorst had returned to London for an indefinite period, and Stephen was compelled to postpone the retribution which he had sworn to mete out to the traitorous baronet.

One afternoon he set out on foot towards Oldfield Grange. This was the first time he had journeyed in that direction, his pride having hitherto forbidden him to allow anyone to suspect for a moment that he might be interested in the house or its tenants. The sky was overcast and threatening, and it appeared that the delightful, warm spring weather of the past week had almost come to an end. Before Stephen had covered two miles a sharp shower warned him that he would be ill-advised to proceed farther, and with a vague feeling of disappointment he retaced his steps to the inn. He reached it just as the rain recommenced—this time with the evident intention of continuing indefinitely; and he sighed dolefully as he opened the door of the small private sitting-room which he had hired, for wet weather would make his lot still more difficult to bear.

"Good afternoon, Stephen."

He stopped dead on the threshold, still grasping in his hand the knob of the open door. He gazed in surprise at the radiant vision which confronted him, but his face betrayed no sign of the pleasure which would have lighted the eyes of most men who had suddenly found themselves in the presence of one so beautiful.

For that Stephen's visitor was beautiful the most captious critic could not have denied. The transparent fairness of her flawless complexion was rendered the more wonderful

by the night-black hair which curled about her ears and by the bright crimson hue of her small, sensuous mouth. The slightly aquiline nose and firm, round chin somewhat belied the appealing softness of the expression which she now showed to Stephen, but this seeming contradictoriness only added to her allurement. Exception might perhaps have been taken to the color of her eyes, which were a peculiar slate-blue; but the perfect arch of the black brows above them and the long curling lashes which fringed their half-closed lids made one forget their hue, and remember only their provocative glance.

And the beauty of her face was equalled, if not excelled, by the beauty of her figure. Nearly as tall as Stephen, her generous proportions were such as might have aroused the envy of Venus herself. The firm set of her deep bosom was emphasized by the litheness of a supple waist, which was in turn glorified by the sweeping lines of the hips and the full thigh, the outline of which was revealed by the manner in which she had disposed her riding-habit about her. She stood before the fire with her right elbow resting on the mantleshelf and her bare, slim right hand hanging indolently down, whilst the foot with which she gently tapped the fender was shapely, and distinctly small for a woman of her size. From hat to boots she was attired in unrelieved black, and the sombreness of her attire added a subtle mystery to the entrancing picture which she made.

"What is the matter, Stephen? You regard me as though I were a grisly phantom. Are you not pleased to see me?" she asked, with wistful raillery, as she abandoned her position by the fireplace and advanced towards him with both hands outstretched.

"Did you expect me to be pleased?" he countered curtly, closing the door and walking forward into the room. He ignored the hands held out to him, and his visitor, with a slight shrug of her shoulders at his conduct, turned and

seated herself with unstudied grace in an old high-backed armchair.

"I expected you to feign pleasure even if you do not feel it," she retorted, a sharp note apparent in her voice. "'Tis a cavalier welcome you give a woman for whom, not long ago, you professed undying love."

Stephen frowned, but the slight flush which ran over his cheeks told his visitor that her shaft had found its mark.

"It ill becomes you to remind me of that, madam," he retorted grimly. "It belongs to the past, and the past is dead."

"The past is never dead," she returned swiftly. "You may bury it as deep as you please and conveniently forget its funeral, but it will rise and confront you in its own good time. 'Tis the one thing which has the power to defy the grave, Stephen."

"Maybe." He made a gesture of impatience. "But I trust you did not come here to discuss the past, madam, for it interests me not one whit."

She winced, and a hard little smile marred for a moment her loveliness. "No? Yet methinks I have some news for you that will make the past of vital interest to you. You did not expect to meet me hereabouts?"

"I knew your husband's home was in Lancashire, but it had not occurred to me that London could possibly allow its queen of beauty to rusticate in the north," he said cynically.

"I might say the same of London's Buck Burgoyne," she retorted coolly. "May I ask what or who it is that has kept him here for so long?"

"How do you know how long I have been here?" he queried sharply.

"You are rude, and you avoid my question." She laughed lightly. "Well, I will answer yours, and then perhaps you will profit by example and answer mine. You may recollect that my house, Blentham Lodge, is at Worpleden, and at present I am residing there. A week ago I was

out riding when my horse cast a shoe not a hundred yards from this inn, and I sought refreshment in the coffee-room here whilst my groom took him to the smith yonder. I saw you from the window in the company of Ned Carless, so I know that you have been here a week at the very least."

"Is that all?" The question was asked carelessly and seemed of no importance, but it brought a peculiar glint to his companion's eyes.

"That is all for the present," she replied enigmatically. "And my curiosity still remains unsatisfied," she reminded him.

Stephen sighed impatiently. "If you must know, madam, I was journeying south when my horse, a valuable animal to which I am much attached, sprained a——"

She stopped him with a gesture. "I asked you for the reason; I pray you spare me the excuse," she said contemptuously.

He flushed angrily. "What do you mean, madam?" he cried.

"What I say. I am not quite a fool, Stephen, as perhaps you may remember."

He made no reply, but taking a snuff-box from his pocket, drummed idly on its lid with his finger-tips. She watched him for a moment with hard eyes; then her expression softened, and she spoke in a low, sweet voice.

"Stephen, dear, I did not come here to quarrel with you," she said. "I assure you my purpose was vastly different. Have you noticed my clothes?"

He looked his astonishment at her apparently irrelevant question, and then smiled cynically. "I have. They are, as usual, perfect; and black becomes you admirably," he said.

"I scarcely think I deserved that, Stephen," she reproached him quietly. "I did not ask your opinion of their fit or their appearance; I only hoped that you had noted their hue."

"And so I have. Did I not say so?"

"You did, but 'tis obvious that it has no significance for you." Her eyes were very bright, but suddenly it seemed to Stephen that their gleam was due to unshed tears, and he looked at her in troubled perplexity. Then comprehension dawned in his face, and he took an impulsive step towards her.

"Forgive me, Barbara," he begged contritely. "I am a hard-hearted fool. You are in mourning?"

"Yes." The word was scarcely more than a whisper.

"For whom?"

She raised her eyes to his, and looked at him long and searchingly ere she replied. "For my husband," she breathed, at last.

"Your husband!" echoed Stephen dully. "You mean to say that you are a widow?"

"Yes, Stephen," she replied, watching his face intently.

He stood irresolute for a moment, nonplussed by her unexpected and unwelcome revelation. Then he commenced to murmur polite expressions of sympathy; but before he had said a dozen words she interrupted him.

"Please don't, Stephen," she said quietly. "Such words are a mockery between you and me, for you know full well that I did not love my husband."

"Yet you married him," he sneered, his manner changing abruptly.

"True, I married him, as you say; but I didn't know that within a month I should be sharing his favors with a Spanish dancer."

"You took the risk with your eyes wide open, madam," he retorted mercilessly, his mouth hard and his eyes stern. "Even before you became betrothed to him you were warned a thousand times. His dissolute character was an open book to all who knew him, his face a plain index to his character to those who did not. But warnings went for naught; you laughed at everyone—myself included—who

tried to turn you from your purpose, and you persisted in gratifying your foolish ambition."

"My ambition?" She flushed slightly, but met his eyes boldly.

"Yes, your ambition. You cannot deny that it was simply and solely ambition that influenced you. The lure of a title was too dazzling to be disregarded by a woman of your type; the prospect of becoming the Countess of Meltondene drew you as inevitably as a magnet draws a needle. So if you have paid dearly for the privileges of rank, 'tis scarce fitting that you should complain."

"Stephen, please, please be merciful," she cried, holding out to him an imploring hand. "I——"

"Were you then so compassionate to me that you can expect me to be merciful?" he demanded fiercely.

"But, Stephen, I was poor and my life had been hard, and I longed for the ease and luxury that only wealth could give," she pleaded, tears in her eyes and voice. "I did but grasp the golden opportunity to appease that longing, and surely that was not a very terrible crime."

"I am not your judge, madam, but if you feel it incumbent upon you to state your case to me, at least be good enough to state it in full. Had it been only wealth and luxury after which you hankered, I could have given you those in full measure—as well as a love which would have been yours for all time. But I was only a commoner; and love makes but a poor showing against rank in the lists where ambition is arbiter."

"You are cruel, Stephen, cruel and hard," she murmured brokenly. "I was young; I didn't realize what I was doing."

"The time-worn, threadbare excuse of your sex!" he commented scathingly. "You were old enough to know what manner of man Lord Meltondene was—in fact, you made no secret of the fact that you did know. And you were old enough to understand fully that you were deliberately sacrificing love to marry him."

"I didn't understand—I didn't," she cried wildly, rising to her feet in her emotion, and placing her hand on his arm.

He thrust the hand away roughly. "It gives me no pleasure to remind you that two nights before your wedding you told me with your own false lips—aye, with your arms around my neck and tears in your eyes—that you loved me as I loved you, but that your decision was unalterable," he went on harshly. "You even hinted that your marriage need make no breach between us. Do you remember, madam? 'Twas in that unguarded moment I saw your naked soul and, for the first time, understood what manner of woman it was that I had worshipped. And at that instant my love for you died—sacrificed on the altar of your ambition. You had been mistaken in your estimate of me, madam. I was no angel, but I was at least too fastidious to take from a woman gifts which only her husband could in honor accept. That was five years ago; as you said just now, the past never dies!"

She quailed beneath the lash of his scorn, and for a time there was silence in the room—a silence broken at intervals by long, shuddering sobs which seemed to rend the woman's very soul. At last, with an obvious, effort, she regained control of herself, and lifted a lovely, tear-stained face to his.

"Oh, Stephen, if you only knew how differently I had pictured this meeting," she said wistfully. "I had thought your love was a finer, greater thing than it now shows itself; and love which cannot forgive belies its name."

"I repeat, madam, that my love is dead," he replied. "Until you murdered it, it would have done anything and forgiven anything at your command. Your lightest word was its law, your most fleeting glance its treasure. But your eyes were fixed on the bright star of ambition, and ruthlessly you trampled beneath your feet the love that knelt imploring in your path. Life has been prodigal in its gifts to you, madam, but you cannot have everything."

"I don't ask for everything," she cried quickly. "My lesson is learnt, Stephen—learnt in the school of bitter experience; it is engraved on my heart, ineffaceable and mocking. There is no need for you to recount my follies; I know them only too well. The choice between substance and shadow was offered to me and in my inexperience I grasped at the shadow. My title is empty and barren, and how gladly would I barter it for love!"

"You are prone to barter, madam; methinks you have the soul of a huckster," he observed relentlessly. "You are like a child who, having chosen the highly-colored confection and found it bitter, would fain change it for the less attractive white one which it knows to be sweet. But the shopkeeper will not permit the exchange, and, of all shopkeepers, life is the most adamant."

"I know, I know," she murmured. "But you are not a shopkeeper, Stephen, and I implore you to give me one more chance. I love you, dear—'twas too late when I found out the magnitude of my love—and I ask you to love me again just a little." She drew her superb figure to its full height, and with a slow movement, full of infinite grace, she turned completely round. "Look at me, Stephen. Is it very difficult for a man to love a woman such as I am, despite her failings and her misdeeds? I am young, I am beautiful, and—wonder of wonders!—I am again free to wed where I will. Ah, Stephen, I beg you not to think me unwomanly in speaking thus; remember that I am fighting for my happiness. Take me, Stephen. I will go anywhere, do anything, be everything you wish; my love shall delight you by its passion, charm you by its humility, and astonish you by its intensity."

She had moved close to him as she was speaking, and now, without warning, she flung her arms around his neck and pressed her beautiful body close against his. Her dewy crimson mouth sought first his brow, then his cheek, and last of all his lips, and, despite himself, Stephen thrilled to

its passionate caress. The blood coursed through his veins in a mad riot, and instinctively his arms went round her, and his lips gave to hers measure for measure. For a moment radiant joy flooded the woman's being; then she shuddered as her instinct warned her that his passion was counterfeit. But still she clung to him, determined to enjoy this fleeting ecstasy to the full ere he recovered his poise; and at that instant the door opened.

Oblivious to everything but Stephen, Lady Meltondene had failed to hear the timid knock, and Stephen was unable to release himself from her clinging arms before the door was opened wide. He stood immediately facing the opening, and to his consternation he saw that Miss Sylvia Ravenscourt was close behind the pretty serving-maid whose intention it had been to announce her, and that she could not fail to observe his compromising position.

The maid stopped in confusion on the threshold and blushed vividly. "Oh, I—I beg your—your pardon, sir; I—I thought you were alone," she stammered. "Miss Ravenscourt has called to see you."

Lady Meltondene turned swiftly, and the maid shrank before the anger in her face. But Stephen, with a coolness of demeanor widely at variance with the tumult within him, gently thrust her aside, and, smiling reassuringly at the maid, said quietly:

"Your error was quite natural. Please show Miss Ravenscourt in."

The maid disappeared hastily, and Sylvia, disdainful of mien and cold of eye, entered the room. She ignored the chair which Stephen placed for her, and stopped him with an imperative gesture when he would have presented her to his companion.

"Lady Meltondene and I are already acquainted," she said frigidly, eyeing Barbara slowly from top to toe with that magnificent insolence which is the exclusive possession

of women. "I must ask pardon of you both. I fear my arrival was a trifle inopportune, and that I intrude."

"Not at all, Miss Ravenscourt," said Lady Meltondene sweetly, resuming her seat with consummate self-possession, and returning Sylvia's stare with interest. "Stephen and I are very old friends, and we had not met for a long period. Hence the situation in which you surprised us."

Stephen almost ground his teeth at the subtle suggestion which this speech conveyed, but it was strictly true, and he was unable to refute one word of it. Nevertheless, he would have spoken had not Lady Meltondene, who was watching him covertly but closely, again forestalled him.

"Stephen did not tell me he was expecting another visitor besides myself," she continued, in the same honeyed accents.

"He was not expecting me," said Sylvia sharply.

"Ah! A surprise visit, eh? And doubtless a welcome one. Men are always the same susceptible creatures from their teens to their seventies, and I fear we women foolishly pander to their weakness." She sighed. "But the world has a censorious tongue, Miss Ravenscourt. A widow may visit a bachelor's apartment with impunity, but a young unmarried woman, if she would avoid scandal, must be more circumspect."

Sylvia's cheeks flamed and her eyes blazed with wrath. But the tone of her voice was frigidity itself as she made reply.

"You jump to conclusions with astonishing agility, Lady Meltondene," she said acidly. "But 'tis not always wise to measure others by one's own standard; every woman does not enjoy the extreme intimacy with the opposite sex which would appear to be your privilege. Indeed, 'tis my misfortune to be scarcely acquainted with Mr. Burgoyne—a state of things which you may be surprised to learn gives me infinite satisfaction."

Lady Meltondene smiled maliciously. "That last remark will be difficult to explain away when I am gone," she

said, rising to her feet in preparation for departure. "But there was no need for you to worry, Miss Ravenscourt; believe me, I am discretion itself."

"You have that reputation!" retorted Sylvia swiftly, with a smile of infinite meaning. "Yet, lest my seeming indiscretion should cause you a sleepless night, let me say that my reason for seeking Mr. Burgoyne is simply that I am the bearer of a message."

"From whom?" The question was asked sharply, and suspicion gleamed in Lady Meltondene's eyes as she glanced quickly from one to the other of her companions.

Sylvia arched her eyebrows in supercilious surprise. "Forgive me, madam," she said, with a mocking little courtsey. "Despite what I have seen, I cannot believe that you are so deep in Mr. Burgoyne's confidence as that!"

"A foolish question prompted by idle curiosity, my dear," explained Lady Meltondene airily, shrugging her beautiful shoulders. "I pray you both excuse me; my groom will be getting impatient of waiting out there in the rain. Stay and receive your message, Stephen; there is no need for you to escort me to my horse, and I would not have you keep Miss Ravenscourt waiting. Farewell, Miss Ravenscourt; give my love to Averill, won't you? It has been a pleasure to meet you again."

She walked towards the door which Stephen, who had stood in acute discomfort and embarrassment during this rapier-play of words, now held open for her; but as she came abreast of him she stopped, and gazed at him fondly.

"I trust I shall see you again in a day or so, Stephen dear," she said, in a low voice which was, however, sufficiently loud to enable Sylvia to hear clearly every word she said. "Until then, farewell. It has been a wonderful meeting."

Before he could divine her purpose, she, with amazing adroitness, lifted her hand to his head, and, leaning forward, kissed him full on the mouth. Then, with triumph in her

face and bearing, she disappeared into the passage, leaving behind her a man speechless with astonishment and rage and a woman sick with disappointment and disgust.

For a moment neither spoke; then Stephen closed the door and turned to his companion.

"I await your censure, Miss Ravenscourt," he said, with a grim coolness which he did not feel.

"Then you wait in vain, Mr. Burgoyne," she retorted stiffly. "Congratulations would surely be more fitting."

"Congratulations? Upon what?" His astonishment was obviously unfeigned.

Sylvia raised her eyebrows. "From what I have seen I naturally concluded that you and Lady Meltondene are betrothed," she said coldly.

A dark flush mounted to Stephen's cheeks, and he frowned blackly. "Your conclusion is entirely erroneous," he said vehemently.

"You positively amaze me, Mr. Burgoyne," she declared. "I frankly confess that I am mystified. But perhaps there is some explanation of which I am not aware; 'tis not always wise to judge by appearances, I know," she concluded, with a faint hint of friendliness in her voice.

But Stephen's pride forbade him to clear himself at the expense of a woman, and not a word could he say in his own defence which would not reflect discreditably upon Lady Meltondene. He was in a cleft stick—an unpleasant position from which he must perforce make no effort to extricate himself, trusting to chance or his good fairy to perform the task for him.

"I regret that circumstances do not permit me to offer any explanation, Miss Ravenscourt," he said gravely.

"Ah!" The exclamation spoke volumes. "Then you wish me to draw my own conclusions?"

"I would much prefer that you wiped from your memory all that you have seen," he said earnestly, "although I know

that to be impossible. Nevertheless, I beg of you to be as charitable to me as you can."

"In other words, you would like me to be silent," she said contemptuously. "You will get from me the treatment you deserve, sir—no more, no less. Oh, Mr. Burgoyne, I have never been so disappointed in a man in all my life as I am in you," she added tempestously.

"Why are you disappointed?" he asked dully.

"Because I am a fool," she cried. "Yes, a fool to have believed in you in spite of the evidence of my senses. I blinded myself to the obvious, and saw you through the eyes of romance. For I thought that it was love of Averill that brought you here and kept you here, and I was glad —romantic little idiot that I am!"

"What reason had you for thinking that?" asked Stephen sharply, spurred from his torpor of despair by her unexpected reference to Averill.

"Because she told me how you had passed her on your way south and how rudely you stared at her," she returned. "She did not then know who you were, of course, but the next day she found out that, instead of proceeding on your journey, you had retraced your steps and taken up your abode at this inn. It will doubtless flatter you to learn that she was more than a little curious about you; and I have no doubt whatever that she secretly cherished the same ridiculous notions concerning your motives that I did."

The light of hope flickered uncertainly in Stephen's eyes as he listened to her, and when she paused he cried eagerly: "You really think that, Miss Ravenscourt?"

"I do, Mr. Burgoyne," she said coldly. "But you have already sinned past her forgiveness, and 'twill scarcely help matters when she hears that her supposed worshipper came here, not for her sake, but because he is the lover of the most notorious woman in the county."

"That is grossly unjust, madam—not only to me but to Lady Meltondene as well," he protested hotly. "I——"

"To you it may be," she interrupted, with a sceptical little smile. "To your mistress it certainly is not. I know Barbara Meltondene as well as, if not better than, you do, and I am in no doubt as to the correctness of my estimate of her. Ever since her marriage her love-affairs have been an open scandal; she has had a fresh lover for each month of the year. Averill will be disgusted when she learns that you are the latest—though I question whether she will be surprised!"

"Miss Ravenscourt, I implore you not to mention this matter to her," he begged. "Spare me that at least. Your conclusions are hopelessly, criminally wrong. Will you not accept my word of honor that, despite what you have seen, I have done nothing whatever to merit the accusation which you would make against me?"

"No!"

The curt monosyllable struck him like a blow. Never before had his word been doubted by anyone; the scornful unbelief which he read in Sylvia's face hurt him as he had never been hurt. It was incredible to him that either she or any other person could deem him capable of lying to save his face. He felt suddenly half stunned, and incapable of clear thought; and, forgetful of the fact that his guest was still standing, he sank listlessly into a chair and fixed brooding, miserable eyes on the firegrate.

Sylvia noted his distress, and for a moment pity almost overcame her indignation. But she remembered his crimes and steeled her heart against him.

"I shall certainly tell Averill what I have seen," she said resolutely.

"But why? What good purpose will it serve?" Irritation was now the dominant note in Stephen's cry, for he felt that a malignant Fate was goading him beyond endurance. Anguish or despair might, perhaps, have won Sylvia over, but the mere hint of bad temper promptly

alienated her dawning sympathy and rendered her resolution inflexible.

"It will serve the purpose of presenting Mr. Burgoyne in his true colors," she retorted disdainfully. "It will confirm Averill's opinion as to the reason why he and his lawless companions deemed fit to try to abduct her."

Stephen started. "What do you mean?" he demanded roughly.

"I mean that I know you to be the man who escaped from custody a week or so ago," she replied calmly. "I recognized you the instant you entered Lady Alverford's drawing-room. Averill was not so sure, but a glimpse of your wrists resolved her doubts."

"My wrists?" echoed Stephen, glancing down at them involuntarily.

"Yes, your wrists. You doubtless remember that they had been lacerated by your bonds; and although the sleeves of your coat were long and you were careful to keep them well pulled down, an unwary gesture betrayed you. And that brings me at last to the reason for my call. You are in danger, Mr. Burgoyne."

He laughed suddenly and mirthlessly. "'Fore gad! madam, I seem to be in every kind of unpleasant predicament at one and the same time," he cried bitterly. "In such a case, danger may rather be welcome than otherwise."

"I am glad my news pleases you, sir," she said satirically. "Colonel Oldfield bids me tell you that Crisp suspects you, and that you are watched day and night. He advises you to leave the district without an instant's delay, for he believes you may be arrested at any moment."

"Colonel Oldfield sent you with that message to me!" Stephen was growing more and more bewildered.

"Yes. He desired Averill to bring it, but she refused point-blank. So I—I now regret to say—volunteered for the service."

"But why should the Colonel be concerned for my safety?"

"The reason he gives is that he cannot credit that you are the wanted man. I suspect that the truth is that he admires your colossal effrontery in openly remaining near the scene of your crime, and daring to visit Lady Alverford on the very day of your escape. However that may be, the High Constable called upon him this morning to ask his advice. Crisp is fearful of the consequences of a mistake, and hesitates to arrest you on suspicion. At first the Colonel, with a mistaken sense of sportsmanship, poohpoohed the matter, but he quickly found that Crisp's suspicions were too strong to be lightly dismissed. So he advised him to hold his hand for a day or two, to which Crisp agreed. Then the Colonel, having consulted Averill and me, decided to warn you. At first he thought of sending Sergeant Ball, but this was not considered wise in view of the fact that you are watched, and that it might lead Crisp to think that you had been warned and to take precipitate action. On the other hand, he was unlikely to regard a formal and quite open call by a lady, even if she were a member of Colonel Oldfield's household, as suspicious; and that is why I am here. And having delivered my message, Mr. Burgoyne, I will bid you good day."

She turned towards the door, but Stephen sprang to his feet and stood in her path. "One moment, please, Miss Ravenscourt," he said hastily. "Permit me to ask another question. Is Colonel Oldfield as certain as you seem to be that I am the escaped prisoner?"

"No. Like Crisp, his suspicions are strong, but he is not sure."

"And Lady Averill?"

"Averill is in no doubt whatever."

"And did I just now understand you to say she has expressed an opinion as to my motive for the attempted crime of which you believe me guilty?"

"She has."

"May I ask what that opinion is?"

Sylvia blushed vividly and averted her eyes. "She puts the worst possible construction on it," she replied, in a low voice.

"And do you agree with her, Miss Ravenscourt?" he asked, more anxiously than he knew.

"At first I emphatically disagreed, but after what I have seen this afternoon I am reluctantly compelled to change my opinion."

"Thank you, Miss Ravenscourt, both for your kindness in bringing me the Colonel's message and for the patience with which you have answered my questions. I am your debtor, and that I always pay my debts is one of my few virtues." He turned and opened the door wide for her. "Some day I hope to prove to you that your estimate of me is wrong. That the task will be difficult appears probable; that I shall accomplish it is certain."

There was neither boastfulness nor bravado in the grave manner in which he spoke; and as Sylvia walked at his side down the old stone staircase and out through the low ceilinged, wainscoted hall to where Colonel Oldfield's carriage awaited her, she began to wonder if, after all, she had misjudged him.

Heedless of the steady downpour, she paused irresolute with one foot on the carriage step and regarded him steadfastly, her sympathies warring with her intellect. Then, as though she had suddenly made up her mind, she swiftly took her seat in the vehicle, and the footman slammed the door. But even yet she was not satisfied, and, thrusting her pretty head through the open window, she said hurriedly:

"Mr. Burgoyne, you have not yet told me your intentions. What reply am I to give to Colonel Oldfield?"

"Please convey to him my most grateful and sincere thanks for his courtesy and for the service which he has endeavored to render to a stranger. Tell him that I do not doubt that his advice to make myself scarce is sound, but that I regret that I am unable to take it. Come what may,

here I am and here I shall remain until I have achieved my purpose."

"And what is your purpose, may I ask, sir?" asked Sylvia, her eyes twinkling for the first time.

"It is to gain the respect and win the love of Lady Averill Stapleton," he said evenly.

"La! Methinks you have a mighty good opinion of yourself, Mr. Burgoyne," she cried mockingly. "'Twill take a real man to achieve that."

"So I think, madam," he said, as, bowing low, he signalled to the coachman to start his horses, and, turning abruptly, entered the inn.

CHAPTER XIV

RELATES HOW STEPHEN AND SIR RANDOLPH GORST FOUGHT FOR A PECULIAR PRIZE

SPRING was always tardy in her coming to Greypool Wood. She invariably seemed loth to oust the decay of winter from its depths, and to touch to vivid, verdant life the gaunt branches of the trees which stood in tall and naked majesty on the edge of the wide-flung moor. Perhaps she stayed to gather courage ere she gave battle to the bitter, icy blasts from the north and east which swept at will across the open heath and relentlessly harried the defenceless and unprotected wood, or maybe she, in the selfishness of her youth, would not trouble to surmount the hill which forbade her playmates, the southerly and westerly breezes, to laugh and frolic in its glades.

But when at last summer threatened to usurp her sway, then she awoke to her duty, and showered upon Greypool Wood the rarest treasures of her fragrant, fairy basket. She spread upon its floor a carpet of dainty bluebells so thick that it was scarcely possible to tread without crushing to pulp a dozen lovely, nodding, azure gems; she lavishly clothed in her most radiant hues of shimmering green the sombre, silent trees, and made them whisper ecstatically together of the wonder of her coming. Into every thicket and brake within its confines she sent the most accomplished of her feathered heralds to hymn her praise and to sing the palpitating, age-old songs of matingtime and love; from the pool which gave to the wood its name she banished the grey sullenness, and made of it a mirror of laughing blue loveliness

which reflected the shy white of the daisies and the flashing gold of the buttercups with which she had powdered its banks.

Averill adored Greypool Wood. It belonged to her uncle, and lay between the grounds of his house and the moor; but Averill regarded it as her very own, for it was seldom that any human being other than herself disturbed the tranquility of the timid wild things that made of it their home. In it she was wont to find an ever-changing beauty which was balm to her soul, and a peace which banished from her mind all the irksome little frets and worries of everyday life; to it she came for aid whenever she grappled with a problem which was more perplexing than usual.

It was for the latter reason that she sought its solitude on this deliciously warm, sunny afternoon which followed two days of persistent, drizzling rain. The ground was still damp, but Averill recked naught of this; her little boots were stout and well chosen, and she herself did not belong to the type of woman that fears either the vagaries of the weather or the warnings of that pessimistic school of elderly croakers which appears to believe that death lurks in every passing whim of wise old Dame Nature. The indescribable perfume of spring enveloped her like an invisible, enchanted cloak before she had penetrated ten yards into the wood; and she stopped suddenly to gasp with delight as her eyes encountered the full beauty of the huge masses of vividly blue flowers which covered the ground. A large flat stone which lay close to the foot of a tree caught her wandering, wondering glance, and, almost unconscious of what she did, she sat down upon it so that she might more comfortably drink in the loveliness of her surroundings.

But very soon her thoughts returned again to the problem which had lately obsessed them. That problem was Stephen Burgoyne. Whilst she hated to admit it, her innate honesty compelled her to confess to herself that this man had enchained her interest in a way that no other member of his

sex had hitherto succeeded in doing. From the very first time she had seen him—that time when he had roused her ire by his unmannerly stare—she had known him for no ordinary man, and his actions since that time had served to confirm her estimate of him. His strange and inexplicable conduct had mystified her, and increased to uncomfortable proportions her curiosity regarding him, in addition to which his outspoken prophecy that he would turn her dislike of him into love, whilst it had made her intensely angry and haughtily indignant, had thrilled her with a fear that was at once delicious and apprehensive.

Her first emotion when she discovered that he was one with the prisoner who had escaped from her uncle's custody was pleasure that she had been kind to him; but this had quickly given place to a growing suspicion that his motive in attempting to abduct her was far from being an altruistic one. Her knowledge of the men who were the boon companions of "His Royal Highness" was thorough and comprehensive, and she cherished no girlish delusions as to their knightly characteristics. The foppishly attired individual who boasted himself "Corinthian" was usually a libertine and sometimes a blackguard; too often his claim to the title of gentleman rested in his manners and not in his mode of living. To be in accord with the royal example he must stick at nothing in the pursuit of his amors; the virtue of a woman must be as thistledown in the scales which were weighted with his passions. The more notorious he became for the ruthlessness with which he bent his victims to his lustful will the more he deemed himself a fitting object for the adulation of his fellows; and there were not a few high-born and socially unassailable ladies—particularly such as possessed handsome daughters—who did not hesitate to close their doors to many of those who claimed the privilege of close friendship with the Prince.

And of all the Prince's friends none was more famous than Buck Burgoyne. Yet Averill, to whom his name had

long been familiar, could not condemn him utterly on that fact alone. Prejudiced as she was against the Corinthian, justice compelled her to admit that, so far as she knew, the hot breath of scandal had left Stephen unscathed. She had heard him spoken of as a rider whose skill had won for him many coveted trophies; as a fine whip who had ofttimes driven the famous "Highflyer" coach; as a keen supporter of "The Fancy" who was as apt with his fists as were many of the professional fighters to whom he gave his patronage; but never as an amorist. The one solitary episode to his discredit in that direction was the scene with Lady Meltondene of which Sylvia Ravenscourt had been an unwilling witness.

But prone, like most of her sex in such cases, to judge harshly on the flimsiest evidence, this last had condemned him utterly in Averill's eyes. She had been so certain in her own mind that it was for her sake he lingered in the district that she was piqued beyond measure to find that the charming magnet was apparently not herself, but a more beautiful and less fastidious woman whom she disliked intensely. Her chagrin was out of all proportion to her professed indifference to him; and with a pang of dismay she at length realized that there was more than a little of jealousy in it.

And even as the truth forced itself upon her she promptly began to deny it. She jealous? Absurd notion! The man was nothing, less than nothing, to her; how then could she be jealous? What possible attraction could one whose ambition in life was bounded by sport, fine clothes, and his own conceit—a conceit so overwhelming that it had led him to boast arrogantly to her that he would make her love him—have for her? He was obviously the epitome of everything which she scorned in men—the beau-ideal of those dissolute dandies who had so frequently come under the merciless lash of her scorn.

The staccato crack of a snapping twig awoke her from

her deep reverie, and she lifted her head sharply. Heavy footsteps, muffled but plainly audible, and the rustle of disturbed undergrowth, warned her that she was not alone in the wood. Somebody had entered it from the direction of the road, and was sauntering slowly down a path which led into another and larger glade which lay about ten yards away from the one in which she sat and which was plainly visible to her.

This unwonted disturbance of her solitude both irritated and alarmed her. Such a thing had never before happened here. The wholesome veneration which the country folk had for private property forbade them to enter Greypool Wood without the permission of its owner, and Averill felt certain the trespasser must be a stranger—probably some tramp or itinerant poacher who hoped to ensnare a meal. It behoved her not to betray her presence to such a one; the place was lonely, and, although she had little money or jewellery about her person, she would be an easy prey to an unscrupulous vagabond, and one which he would be unlikely to neglect.

Very quietly she abandoned her seat and took up a position behind a tree-trunk which ensured her not being seen, but from which, by cautious peeping, she could obtain a full view of the open space which the intruder was approaching. Presently the tall figure of a man, handsomely attired and swinging a long, tasselled cane, stepped out into the dappled sunlight, and Averill started with surprise, for she recognized instantly Sir Randolph Gorst. She both disliked and despised him, but she also feared him, and in her fear was a great measure of the paralyzing fascination which the snake has for the rabbit which it is about to devour.

But scarcely had Sir Randolph reached the centre of the glade than he stopped and, wheeling abruptly, stood gazing intently in the direction from which he had come. And at that same instant Averill became conscious that yet a third party had violated her sanctuary—someone who was

evidently in a hurry, and whose rapid approach brought a frown of annoyance to Sir Randolph's brow.

A further surprise was in store for Averill, for almost at once the very man whose intriguing personality had caused her to come here burst into the clearing. He checked abruptly within a few paces of Sir Randolph and stood breathing rather heavily; and Averill, who thrilled with excitement as her instinct warned her that she was about to be the unseen witness of events rare to feminine eyes, observed that he carried a heavy whip, the long lash of which hung in loops from the hand which held it. She also noted that Gorst's grip on the cane with which he was casually beheading the nodding bluebells had become tense, although the scowl on his face had given place to a smile of easy nonchalance.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Burgoyne," he greeted the newcomer coolly. "I had not thought to meet you in so pleasant a place. But you must forgive me if my unexpected presence here has delayed your journey, for you seemed to be in haste."

"My journey is ended, Sir Randolph," returned Stephen grimly. "And methinks the place will seem less pleasant to you ere you leave it."

"Ah! Then your business is with me?"

"It is."

"The business which compels the imperturbable Buck Burgoyne to run must be pressing indeed," sneered Sir Randolph, as he idly decapitated another bluebell.

Stephen's lips were set in a hard, thin line, and they scarcely opened as he made reply. "'Tis pressing enough, as you will surely find. I saw you pass down the lane, and I returned to the inn for this whip, which accounts for my having had to run. I have come to thrash you, Sir Randolph."

The other laughed lightly. "You are a droll fellow,

Burgoyne," he said indulgently. "Gentlemen do not thrash one another with whips."

"No," agreed Stephen. "Thrashings are the punishments which society metes out to malefactors, cads, and traitors."

Sir Randolph's smile disappeared, and his eyes narrowed ominously. "You choose unpleasant words, sir," he said.

"I choose just ones," retorted Stephen. "You may not be a malefactor, Sir Randolph, but you are cad and traitor both."

"Have a care lest you go too far, Mr. Burgoyne," cried Gorst warningly. "I shall require you to prove what you say."

Stephen laughed contemptuously. "You require proof? Well then, listen. You persuaded me against my better judgment to join you and Alverford in what you called a harmless and pleasant diversion. As a poetic revenge for Colonel Oldfield's threats against Harry we were to hold up the Colonel's coach and carry off his niece, who was to be safely lodged for the night and taken back to her home next morning."

"Is it necessary to recall all this?" Interposed Gorst impatiently.

"You asked for proof, and I am giving it to you," replied Stephen calmly. "Instead of keeping your tryst with Alverford and me, you sent another in your stead whom you paid to assume your identity. Then you betrayed all three of us to the High Constable, and, to make doubly sure that our little comedy should become tragedy, you yourself took command of his men and arranged matters so that we should be caught in the very act of highway robbery and abduction. Are not those the actions of a cad and a traitor?"

Sir Randolph's face flamed, and his eyes blazed with hate as he made reply.

"You damned simpleton!" he almost shouted. "Did you

think me the magnanimous type of idiot who would assist a fool like Alverford to win the most desirable woman in all England? Had Alverford not invited you to join in the venture, Averill would now be mine, for I should have carried her off under his very nose; and she would have been glad enough to marry me ere we had reached Gretna, I warrant you! But your advent changed my plans. Your malign influence alone has kept me from the social position to which my birth entitles me. It was your cursed interference that made Barbara Neville turn from me and refuse to become my wife. But she repaid you for that herself, didn't she?" He laughed hoarsely. "She found the title of Lady Meltondene more alluring than that of Mrs. Burgoyne; she accepted the offer of the earl's decadent nobility in preference to that of your puling, prating love."

Averill could see the flush which mounted to Stephen's cheeks; and the growing joy with which she had heard his accusation against Gorst gave place to bitter disappointment as she listened to the baronet's exposure of the relations which had formerly existed between Stephen and Lady Meltondene. The one cleared him from all suspicion of an unworthy motive for his playing the part of highwayman; his only crime in this connection was folly. But the other, to Averill's reasoning, confirmed his guilt in regard to Barbara Meltondene; it was obvious from Sir Randolph's speech that a love-affair had been in progress between them even before her marriage. Averill went crimson with shame as the awful thought flashed across her mind that perhaps that marriage had not interrupted it. But she had no time to pursue her thought, for Gorst was still speaking.

"You earned my bitter hatred, Burgoyne, and long ago I vowed that some day I would cry you quits," he said. "So when Alverford urged you to join us, I raised my voice in his support, for I saw at once how neatly I might entrap you. It was no traitorous instinct that guided me; it was the instinct that claims an eye for an eye. No man rides

roughshod over Randolph Gorst with impunity. And there you have it."

"And what of Alverford and the man who took your place?" drawled Stephen. "Had they also earned your hate? Or were they unworthy of your consideration?"

"Bah!" Gorst sneered contemptuously. "The one sought Averill's hand and was therefore my rival, and I at least did her a service in ridding her for good and all of such a pitiable suitor. All's fair in love and war, remember. The other was a hireling whom I had paid handsomely for the risks he took; why should I stop to consider him?"

"Your ethics are worthy of you," commented Stephen, in cutting tones. "But we waste time. I did not come here to argue with you; I came to thrash you as I promised, and thrash you I will."

Without hesitation Sir Randolph tossed his cane aside, and a bland smile banished all other expressions from his face. "I fancy the task is beyond you, Mr. Burgoyne," he said easily. "I presume that you have no objection to my removing my coat and cravat to facilitate the matter."

"None whatever," said Stephen politely. "On the contrary, the lash will find your flesh more easily so. And that my arm may be freer to mete out chastisement, I will follow your example."

He placed the whip on the ground at his feet, and with a wary eye on Gorst, he rapidly divested himself of sundry garments; then, picking up his whip again, he stood waiting whilst Sir Randolph carefully made a little pile of the clothes he had discarded.

Suddenly the baronet turned to him and said savagely:

"I have given you rope enough, Burgoyne. Your braggadocio becomes you well, but I am weary of it, and 'tis ill playing to an unappreciative audience. So let us hear no more of thrashings, lest the threat recoil upon you. Do you imagine that I am going to stand here submissive whilst you wield a whip?"

"Not for one moment." Stephen walked across the glade and hung the whip on the branch of a tree; then he returned to his former position opposite Gorst. "But nevertheless I shall thrash you as you deserve, Sir Randolph. You see where the whip hangs? When I have beaten you into submission with my fists I shall use it on you with all the strength that remains to me."

"A pretty boast, but a double-edged one," retorted Gorst, with a laugh. "Suppose you fail in your laudable pugilistic ambition; what then?"

"That is for you to say, Sir Randolph," replied Stephen coolly.

"Good. Then this is what I say. I have seen you fight more than once, and I know that I can beat you. And when I have knocked you out and you lie helpless on the ground, I shall take that whip, and, by God! I'll flay you with it. You may expect no mercy from me; I shall not rest until your clothes are naught but bloody tatters."

Stephen smiled. "I am content, Gorst," he said. "The whip shall be the prize."

Without another word Sir Randolph launched a savage blow at Stephen's head, but the latter was alert and avoided it easily. Then Stephen, feinting with his left, landed heavily in his opponent's ribs. The blow was well timed, and it made Gorst catch his breath and retreat a pace. Stephen, balancing lightly on his toes, followed him—to be met by a jab in the mouth which sent his head back with a nasty jolt.

It did not take many seconds for Stephen to discover that Gorst was no novice at this game of fistcuffs; indeed, he showed marked skill, and a speed which was astounding in a man of his bulk. In addition, he had a considerable advantage in weight; and Stephen quickly realized that he would need all his resources and stamina to make good his boast that he would thrash the baronet ere he left the field.

Averill, watching the scene with fascinated eyes, was the

prey of rapidly changing emotion. Horror and disgust that men could exhibit passions so primitive gave place to indignation that they gave no thought whatever to the havoc they were creating among the wild flowers. They were destroying the beauty of her wood, and she hated them for it. Indignation was in turn banished by fear—fear that Stephen must inevitably fall beneath the swift rain of blows which Sir Randolph showered upon him. But as the minutes passed and he still stood, upright and grim, upon his feet, her fears were forgotten in excitement; and her heart leapt with exultation as a straight left brought a stream of blood pouring from Gorst's nostrils.

Both men were breathing heavily, but neither of them showed any sign of approaching defeat. Back and forth they tramped all over the glade, giving and taking blows in a manner which advertised, even to Averill, their marked skill. Each attacked and retreated in turn, and when at last they were compelled to pause for breath the ground on which they fought had become a sticky mass of pale green pulp.

The pause was of short duration. As though at the bidding of a timekeeper, they went forward to each other with upraised fists, and the dull thud of blows and the quick tread of feet disturbed again the peace of the waning afternoon.

Suddenly Stephen, side-stepping to avoid a terrific right, slipped on the trodden herbage. He made a desperate effort to recover his balance, but the treacherous surface gave him no help, and he measured his length on the ground. Without hesitation, Gorst hurled himself upon his prostrate foe. The full weight of his body crashed down upon Stephen like an avalanche, well-nigh winding him, and making him gasp for breath. He struggled frantically to rid himself of Gorst's bulk, for he knew that he could expect no mercy from the baronet; but, try as he would, he could not throw off the pressure of the knee that was thrust into the pit of

his stomach nor loosen the hold of the massive, muscular arms that bound his own arms to his sides. True, the hold kept shifting slightly, but Stephen knew that it was no effort of his that accomplished this. He was already aware that he was no match for Sir Randolph in a rough-and-tumble, and he understood only too well that Gorst was slowly and surely working himself into a position which would enable him to hold his opponent with one arm whilst he battered the unprotected face below him with his free hand.

After what seemed an eternity to Averill, watching now with eyes that were horror-filled, a triumphant smile slowly dawned on the blood-smeared face of the baronet. Averill saw him lift his right fist to strike, but before the blow fell she buried her face in her hands that she might not witness it.

Gone were all her dark suspicions, her distrust, her jealous anger, her resentment against Stephen; her very soul cried out in agony at his defeat. Her lips were silent, but it was only with an intense effort that she kept them so. It seemed to her that her knight, her champion, lay in the dust for her sake, and yet she was helpless to lend him succor. How she had arrived at this conclusion even she could not have explained; it was her feminine sixth sense, her instinct, which told her that she and she alone had caused these two men to discard the veneer of civilization and to fight as their ancestors of thousands of years ago had fought.

But the blow which Averill feared to witness was never struck. Gorst miscalculated his hold by the merest fraction, and Stephen, alert with the alertness of desperation, seized his heaven-sent opportunity. With a slight wriggle and a terrific heave he flung his assailant from him and sprang to his feet.

A snarl of mortified rage issued from Sir Randolph's lips. Victory had escaped him at the very instant when he thought he had it safe in his grasp. But, despite his dis-

appointment, his agility equalled that of Stephen, and he regained his feet almost simultaneously with his opponent. And if he had ever feared the issue he feared it no longer. His antagonist might be his equal as a boxer, but he was most certainly his inferior in strength. Could he once again contrive to get at grips with him, Stephen's chances would not be worth a minute's purchase.

With this end in view, he concentrated all his efforts upon getting Stephen into a clinch. His blows became much less frequent, yet by sheer weight he forced his opponent into constant retreat. But each time he attempted to entrap between his arm and side one of those flying fists he found himself just too late; each time he tried to clasp Stephen's lithe body in his arms the embrace was cleverly eluded. Time and again, by vigorous use of foot and leg, he endeavored to trip his opponent, but it was all to no purpose; full well did Stephen know that another fall would be fatal, and that he must at all costs keep his feet and his freedom of movement.

This constant frustration of his efforts at length began to have its effect upon Sir Randolph's temper. And as his temper waxed his cautiousness waned. His attack became more ferocious, but his defence became less certain, and twice within as many seconds he escaped, only by good fortune, blows aimed at the point of his jaw. He had conceived the idea of driving Stephen out of the glade so that his movements would be restricted by the trees and the undergrowth.

The light of triumph gleamed in his eyes as a quick backward step brought Stephen into sharp contact with the trunk of a tree. The force of the impact caused him to stumble forward on to one knee; and for the second time Gorst hurled himself at him.

But this time he did not achieve his purpose. A vicious short arm jab caught him full and fair in the stomach just

above the belt, and with a groan of agony he crashed writhing to the ground.

For a moment or two Stephen stood in silent contemplation of his fallen enemy; then, without a word, he turned and strode across to where the whip hung ready. His grim purpose was written in his relentless face, and Averill shuddered as she saw him seize the whip and fling out the long lash in a resounding crack.

The staccato sound made Sir Randolph cease for a moment his moaning. He turned apprehensive eyes in the direction from whence it came, and what he saw caused him to make a desperate and prolonged effort to rise to his feet. But the blow which had prostrated him had been a shrewd one, delivered with all the scientific force of one who knew exactly where to plant it, and he sank down again to the ground.

"Good God, Burgoyne!" he gasped. "You surely don't mean to carry out your threat?"

His answer was the soft whine of the lash as it came swift through the still air and cut him clean across the flank. A stifled cry of pain issued from his lips, and again he struggled frantically to stand upright, but before his tortured body had answered fully the command of his brain that pitiless lash bit deep into his thinly-clad shoulders.

Only by exerting to the utmost his iron will did Gorst prevent himself from screaming. His pride forbade him to scream, yet he knew that did the lash fall a third time neither pride nor will would avail him. And fall a third time it did—this time round the calves of his legs. But he did not scream; he fainted.

Yet even this did not deter Stephen. With cold eyes fixed on the unconscious man, he lifted again above his head the hand which held the whip. But before he could strike, a voice spoke from behind him—a voice low and tense, but vibrant with passion.

"Are you mad, Mr. Burgoyne?" it said. "Or are you

coward? One of the two you must be to treat any man so."

His arm fell to his side, and he turned to face Averill, whose blazing eyes and quivering lips indicated the measure of her indignation. But in his demeanor there was no sign of shame or penitence, and his surprise at her advent failed to soften in the smallest degree the grim expression of his face.

"I trust I am neither, madam," he said coldly. "You were present when I made my vow to thrash Gorst, and I think, if your memory be good, you will agree that I had good cause to make it. I do but keep my word, madam; that is all."

"You have already kept it, Mr. Burgoyne, so let that content you," she returned vigorously. "Has your rage so blinded you that you cannot see that you have thrashed Sir Randolph into unconsciousness?"

"My eyes serve me equally as well as do yours, madam," he replied evenly. "But, though I regret to say it, I brook no interference in the carrying out of my promises to the very letter, not even from you. Gorst's thrashing has but begun, not ended."

Incredulous, horrified eyes looked into his for a moment; then Averill stepped resolutely between Stephen and his victim and drew herself up to her full height.

"Am I really to believe that you intend to whip one who can neither feel, see, nor speak?" she asked, with imperious scorn.

"You are, madam."

"Then I say that you shall not touch him," she cried resolutely. "You barbarian! Unscrupulous as I know you to be, I couldn't have credited you with such savagery had I not myself been a witness of it."

"Stand aside, madam." The order was curt and cold, and instinctively Averill understood that naught she could do would turn this unbending man from his purpose. Yet,

useless though she now knew it to be, she felt compelled to exert herself to the utmost to stay his hand.

"I shall not stand aside," she declared firmly, but with quivering lips. "Are you entirely merciless, Mr. Burgoyne?"

"In this case, yes," he answered. "Mercy is not for such as he."

"Mercy should be for all," she said swiftly. "Yes, even for you."

A grim smile played about his mouth. "You flatter me, Lady Averill," he said, "but you do not convince me."

Then suddenly she changed her tactics. Tears suffused her glorious eyes, and through them she sent a glance of appeal which would have softened a heart of stone. It made Stephen quiver with longing to take her in his arms and to banish her tears with his ardent lips.

"Mr. Burgoyne, I beg of you to spare him further punishment," she implored brokenly. "I pray you not to forget your manhood——"

"Of what concern is my manhood to you?" he interposed, harshly and abruptly.

She hesitated, and the bright blood flooded her cheeks. "I —I would rather not answer that question," she said slowly, obviously choosing her words. "But I ask this of you for my sake, Mr. Burgoyne."

A wonderful light transfigured Stephen's face, and he fixed upon Averill an intent look which, despite her every effort, she found it impossible to sustain. And then the light faded from his eyes, and his mouth became close-lipped and stern.

"For your sake, I think you said, madam." He spoke the words with an infinity of meaning. "Your sex has a partiality for that expression, methinks. May I ask if, in this instance, it has any significance?"

She flushed again, for she did not fail to gather his meaning. He was accusing her of insincerity, of cheating, and she knew that she was guilty.

"It may have much significance or none, sir," she retorted, with a brave attempt at coquettishness which was entirely unconvincing.

His lip curled. "It has usually none, I find," he said. "So stand aside."

"'I shall not," she cried, chagrined and angry.

He did not speak again. Instead, he thrust out his left arm and gently but firmly swept her to one side. Then thrice did his whip send out its hungry lash to find Sir Randolph's arm, hip, and face.

But only one long-drawn moan issued from the baronet's lips; and suddenly Stephen turned and flung the whip far from him into the depths of the wood. Totally ignoring Averill, who had run to the side of his unconscious enemy, he walked to the pool which lay peaceful and unruffled in an adjoining glade and carefully bathed his bruised hands and face. This accomplished, he returned and began to don the garments which he had previously discarded. His inscrutable eyes saw Averill take Sir Randolph's hat to the pool and return with it dripping water. He noted the unceasing efforts which she made to restore the baronet to consciousness; and once he shivered as though an icy wind had blown upon his spine.

At length he picked up his hat and stood ready to depart. He paused for a moment irresolute; then he walked to Averill's side and stood looking down at her.

"You are foolish, madam," he said at last. "You were better employed in nursing back to life a venomous reptile than Sir Randolph Gorst."

But neither by word nor glance did she betray consciousness of his presence, and with a shrug of his shoulders he turned on his heel and left the glade.

CHAPTER XV

PLACES STEPHEN IN A SORRY DILEMMA

EXCITEMENT reigned in Bolderburn. Scarce half an hour had passed since the Deputy Parish Constable, puffed up with dignity and importance and carrying himself with an ostentatious solemnity befitting an occasion unique in the history of the village, had nailed the notice by it four corners to one of the heavy gateposts which flanked the entrance to the Nag's Head stable yard; yet already the news had spread like wildfire in every direction, and it was surprising how many members of a community whose hours of daylight were usually very fully occupied found it possible to repair at once to the point from whence the thrilling news emanated. Even the busy blacksmith had left forge and bellows to take care of themselves whilst he went to verify the startling information which a customer of his had given him.

Not everyone who stared with eyes of wonderment at the official-looking piece of parchment could read it, but that did not in the least detract from its fascination. In the little group of ten or a dozen men which stood around it there was one who was only too pleased to display his learning for the benefit of his fellows. It exalted him for the moment to a position of importance which was none the less sweet because it was transitory; such an opportunity seldom came his way, and he was quite prepared to read the notice as often as anyone cared to listen.

The notice, as became so unique a document, was unusually lengthy and couched in the authoritative terms of

officialdom. It was signed at the foot by Crisp, the High Constable; and the flourish which he had contrived to give to his signature unmistakably proclaimed to the world at large the pleasure which it had given him to place it there.

The first words, printed in large letters, were:

A PROCLAMATION.
£100 REWARD.

Then followed a pompously worded statement to the effect that this sum would be paid to anyone giving information which would lead to the rearrest of the two miscreants who had recently escaped after being taken red-handed in the act of robbery under arms on the King's highway within the hundred of Darnchester and in the vicinity of Bolderburn. A full but rather indefinite description of the criminals was given; but perhaps the most significant paragraph of all was the last.

It announced that whilst the authorities hoped for the recapture of both men that of the man first described was the more ardently desired; this was he who was said to have been wearing a blue coat. He it was who was regarded as the ringleader in the affair—in addition to which it was suspected that he was the author of many other outrages which had taken place both in this district and elsewhere. In the event of his being taken alone the informer would receive £75; if his fellow only were rearrested, then the reward would be but £25.

"That's a rum 'un, that is," commented a burly farmer who had listened carefully whilst a thin, wizened man with horn spectacles on his nose had slowly read out the notice. "Are you sure as you got that last bit right, Mr. Pickup?"

"Perfectly sure, sir, perfectly sure," snapped the thin man, offended that his accuracy should be questioned. "I'll read it again if you wish, but——"

"No need for that," said the farmer impatiently. "I'll tak' your word for it. But I should ha' thought as when

two chaps was catched committin' th' same crime, th' reward should be equal for both on 'em."

"You forget that one is suspected of other crimes as well as this one, Mr. Merryweather," said Mr. Pickup, with a tolerant smile of superiority.

"I forget nowt, Mr. Pickup!" retorted the farmer rudely. "I mayn't be what you'd call a scholar, but I'm none a numskull, dammit! Who's to say as t'other one isn't th' chap as they ought to suspect?"

The logic of this question appealed to the bystanders, and there was a murmur of approval.

"It strikes me as there's some'at funny about it," said a rotund, apple-cheeked little man whose bright eyes bespoke his shrewdness. "Either that, or it's more o' Crisp's bungling. That there feller never did nowt yet in a way that 'ud appeal to sensible folk. He thinks he's a clever 'un, but I reckon he's a fool, if you ask me."

"Aye, there's some'at i' what you say, Willyum," agreed the farmer. "I doubt they're a daft lot i' Darnchester, anyway."

"Come, come, Mr. Merryweather, I think you and Edmonds are judging the matter rather hastily," said Mr. Pickup reprovingly. "For my own part I think the High Constable is right. Has it occurred to anyone here that we have lately had in our midst one of whom we know little or nothing beyond what he himself has told us?"

"Who d'ye mean?" asked Merryweather sharply, with a frowning glance at the speaker.

"I know who he means," interposed a rat-faced fellow. "He means th' chap as calls hisself Mr. Burgoyne, or I'm a Dutchman."

"Dutchman or no, you're a damn fool, Enoch Raikes," cried the farmer angrily. "Aye, and so are you, Pickup. You've no right to put suspicions as there's no call for into folk's heads. You know as well as I do that Mr. Burgoyne

is an old friend of his lordship's, and I'm none asking no better credentials nor that."

"Tut, tut, Mr. Merryweather, you go too fast," said Mr. Pickup, taking off his glasses and polishing them with a large silk handkerchief. "How do you know that Lord Alverford's friendship with Mr. Burgoyne is an old one?"

" 'Cos his lordship told me so," snapped Merryweather. "That's good enough for me, and for you, too."

"I am not so sure of that," objected Mr. Pickup. "Lord Alverford's manner is at times—ah—a little—ah—simple, and maybe he spoke loosely. In any case, the description given seems to me to fit Mr. Burgoyne very closely." He turned, and saw the blacksmith at his elbow. "Ah, Thistleton, if I remember rightly you were the first man in Bolderburn to encounter Mr. Burgoyne. Do you recollect the color of the coat he was wearing when he visited your smithy that day?"

"Aye. It were a blue 'un." The blacksmith spoke with obvious reluctance. "But I wouldn't set too much store by that if I was you, Mr. Pickup."

"Why not, sir, why not?"

"Becos' I see'd you i' a blue coat yourself yesterday," retorted the smith drily. "It weren't what you'd call a smart 'un nor yet a handsome 'un, but it were a blue 'un right enough."

A roar of laughter greeted Thistleton's sally, but the scandal-loving Mr. Pickup was not to be turned from his theory by ridicule. A retired notary's clerk, who, by the death of a distant relative, had become possessed of a comfortable income, he occupied his time in advertising the faults and foibles of his fellows. He battened on scandal like a maggot on flesh decomposing; he gloated over the sins and weaknesses of others as an idol might gloat over bloody sacrifice. In short, he was that most contemptible of all God's creatures—a male gossip.

"You forget yourself, Thistleton," he said, with a hauteur

which accorded ill with his appearance. "And you do the fellow no service by attempting to laugh away the suspicion with which all thinking men must now regard him. I am fully aware that you are not likely to take pleasure in the thought that Burgoyne may be a criminal, for he has, by administering to your base craving for drink, attained no small degree of popularity with some of you. But facts are stubborn things, gentlemen, and I certainly——"

"Shut your mouth, Pickup," interrupted Merryweather bluntly. "This isn't a temperance meeting, and we don't want no speeches from you. Let me tell you that I, for one, 'll believe nowt again' Mr. Burgoyne till it's proved."

"Nor me," came in chorus from most of the group.

"I'm wi' Mr. Pickup," declared the rat-faced Enoch Raikes vehemently. "Burgoyne's a bully. Knocked me down, 'e did—wi'out warning, too."

"Aye, and serve you right," said Thistleton emphatically. "You'll happen not be quite so handy i' th' future at trying to be over free wi' young lasses as hasn't got any parents. You can close your trap, Enoch, my lad. There isn't anybody i' Bolderburn as is like to take your word again' Mr. Burgoyne's."

"I trust you are right, Jim. But I pray you tell me of what the gallant Mr. Raikes accuses me."

The voice came from outside the group, and an embarrassed silence fell upon the disputants. So engrossed had they been that they one and all had failed to observe Stephen's approach; and as they now slowly turned their flushed faces towards him every man there wondered how long he had been close at hand and how much he had heard.

"Come, Jim, you are slow to speech, methinks," said Stephen, in accents of gentle raillery. "Perhaps Raikes will speak for himself." He turned to the rat-faced man with a smile. "What is the point at issue, Enoch?"

"It's nowt, nowt at all," replied Raikes hastily, fear in every line of him. "We was havin' a bit of a hargyment

about a coat o' yours. Mr. Pickup said as it were a blue 'un."

"Well?"

Raikes licked his dry lips, and sought for further words. Stephen's appearance was not reassuring to his craven soul. The ominously smiling face above him was livid with bruises, and dried blood showed plain in the nostrils. There were green stains and patches of mud on Stephen's usually immaculate breeches, whilst the knuckles of the hand with which he idly fingered his cravat were broken and bleeding.

Nor was Raikes the only one to observe these facts. Every member of the group was exercising his brain to account for them, yet not one dared to put a question. It was patent to all that Mr. Burgoyne had come straight from a combat which had been stark and dire, and they quivered with eagerness to know whether he came as victor or as vanquished.

"I am waiting, Raikes." The tones were curt this time, and Raikes's furtive eyes became almost despairing.

"I—I didn't mean no harm, sir," he said desperately. "And it wasn't really me as said aught again' you. It were Mr. Pickup here. Ax him; he'll tell you, sir."

Stephen's lips curled contemptuously. "I see," he said. He fixed the notary's clerk with cold eyes. "Proceed, Mr. Pickup."

Like most men who usurp the unenviable prerogative of women and become scandal-mongers, Mr. Pickup was an abject coward; but he was crafty and cunning, and his legal experience had conduced to quickness of wit. He answered Stephen's question promptly enough, but he averted his eyes lest the apprehension which gleamed in them should be noted.

"Enoch is unjust, Mr. Burgoyne," he said deprecatingly. "We had been reading the proclamation here and were idly conjecturing as to whom the descriptions given might fit. Your name cropped up among others; that was all.

Have you read the proclamation, sir?" He asked the question suddenly, and eyed the other's face askance as he did so.

"No."

Stephen moved a step or two nearer to the gate-post. Every man present watched him narrowly as he read the document through from beginning to end, but if any of them expected him to betray himself they were certainly disappointed. Not a muscle of his face altered as he stood in the centre of the silent, observant group. His air was that of simple curiosity; yet it was far from according with the dismay which the written words caused him.

The significance of the document was instantly patent to him. Although the High Constable's signature was at its foot, he was most certainly not its author. The amount of the reward proposed proved that beyond a doubt. The utmost that could be earned by Mr. Crisp himself for the apprehension of a highwayman was £40 from the Sheriff and £10 from the hundred in which the robbery had taken place; how then could he afford to offer £75 for the taking of a single criminal when he was dependent upon the emoluments of his office for his livelihood?

Vindictive hate, and that alone, was responsible for the zeal which Mr. Crisp was ostensibly showing, but it was not his own hate. It was the hate of Sir Randolph Gorst. It was the malignance of a man who thought he saw his enemy within his toils, and who spared naught to make those toils doubly secure.

And as Stephen stood with his eyes on the portentous parchment it seemed to him that Gorst was like to achieve his object—or, rather, one of two objects.

Stephen was in a desperate situation. Either he must flee, and that at once, thus leaving Sir Randolph a clear field to work his will with Lady Averill Stapleton, or he must remain in Bolderburn and sooner or later be arrested for a crime which might bring him to the gallows. A pretty

predicament, forsooth! It savored rather of some ridiculous play than of real life. Yet it was real enough in all conscience! He must either sacrifice his love or risk his neck, and he liked the choice but little.

"Well, what think you of it, Mr. Burgoyne?" asked Mr. Pickup with some timidity, after an appreciable wait.

Stephen turned his eyes to those of his questioner, who found the steady gaze hard to sustain.

"'Tis surely plain enough," he replied indifferently. "There is a reward to be earned by some zealous citizen, Mr. Pickup—a handsome reward which would scarce come amiss even to one in such comfortable circumstances as you, eh?"

Mr. Pickup forced a laugh. "I shouldn't complain if it came my way," he said, with uneasy flippancy.

"That much is evident in that you have already set your brain to work on the problem! I should counsel haste, Mr. Pickup, for 'Forewarned is forearmed,' you know, and you can scarce expect me to await your convenience in the matter."

The bantering tones in which this advice was given brought a flush to Mr. Pickup's wizened face, and raised a laugh at his expense which obviously annoyed him.

"Your conclusion is erroneous, sir," he began stiffly. "I——"

"You must excuse me, Mr. Pickup," interrupted Stephen, silencing him with a gesture. "I regret that I lack both the time and the inclination for further discussion."

With a cheery nod to the bystanders, he hurried away and entered the inn, leaving the abashed gossip and his solitary supporter to withstand a fusillade of ridicule and chaff.

Yet had those he left behind him known of the torment of mind which possessed him, Mr. Pickup would have tasted the sweets of triumph instead of the bitters of irony.

The inn was apparently deserted as Stephen entered it;

but as he crossed the hall he heard his name spoken quietly, and, looking to his left, he saw the tall figure of Sergeant Ball standing in the doorway of a little-used room at the rear of the bar-parlor. To his surprise the Sergeant, after beckoning to him, placed his finger on his lips with the obvious intention of checking the greeting which Stephen was about to give him.

"Might I have a word with you in here, sir?" he asked, in an undertone.

Without quibble, the mystified Stephen walked through the door which the Sergeant held wide for him. And, a moment later, he was further mystified to find himself gazing into the face of Jerry Dodd, who sat at a table with a pint mug at his elbow and a long clay pipe in his hand.

"Jerry and me is old comrades, you'll understand, Mr. Burgoyne," volunteered the Sergeant, as he carefully closed the door. "Served in my company just afore I left the service—did Jerry; and being as we are both carrying the same sort o' dispatches, there ain't no harm in us handing 'em over together, is there now?"

Stephen glanced from one to the other of the two men in perplexity. "I'm afraid I don't understand, Sergeant," he said rather wearily. "Do you bring me a message or something?"

"Yes," said Jerry, quicker than the Sergeant to note Stephen's physical condition. "You have seen that proclamation, I suppose?"

"I have," replied Stephen, with a mirthless laugh.

"Well, I got here an hour before it was posted, and have been waiting for you since then. The Sergeant came a few minutes later, and we soon found out that we were here on the same errand. And we thought it better to let as few people as possible know that we had sought you, lest we should precipitate matters."

"Well?"

"The matter is urgent, Mr. Burgoyne. He who sent

me"—he paused and shot a meaning glance at Stephen—"he who sent me bade me warn you that, unless you make yourself scarce, you will be arrested ere nightfall. By this time Crisp and his men will have left Darnchester for that purpose. You must get to horse at once, Mr. Burgoyne; an hour hence it may be too late."

"That's right, sir," said the Sergeant earnestly. "Retreat's the word, sir; retreat, and lie low, and the enemy's confounded. Them's Miss Averill's commands, sir."

"Did Lady Averill send you, Sergeant?" queried Stephen, in quick astonishment.

"That she did, sir. The Colonel said as 'ow he'd warned you once and you didn't take no notice, so he wasn't going to do it again. He called you a fool—beggin' your pardon, sir. So Miss Averill orders me to seek you at once, but she wouldn't let me take a horse for fear of arousing suspicion. She said I was just to drop in here casual-like for a drink. You were out when I got here, but nobody knew where you'd gone, and I thought it better to wait for fear I missed you, sir."

"How long is it since you left Lady Averill?"

"I should say about an hour and a half," said the Sergeant. "She walked with me some o' the way until I turned off to take the short cut over the fields. It's a long way for a chap with a game leg, sir."

Stephen stood silent, leaning on the mantelpiece. It was evident that Averill had gone straight to Greypool Wood after leaving the Sergeant. Yet, after the fight which she had witnessed was over, she had not deigned to breathe a word to him of the imminent danger in which he stood. Evidently his conduct had again alienated her sympathies—sympathies which had been aroused somewhat unaccountably; and he smiled bitterly as he thought of the joyous hope that would have been his had the Sergeant's message been delivered to him before instead of after his combat with Sir Randolph Gorst.

And his bitterness made him reckless of what might befall him. He had vowed to stay here until he had won Averill, and stay here he would, despite everybody and everything.

"Please convey my thanks to Lady Averill for her solicitude on my behalf," he said somewhat stiffly to the Sergeant. "But tell her I regret that I am unable to fall in with her suggestion. The time is not yet ripe for my departure, and whatever may befall, here I must remain for the present."

"But—begging your pardon, sir—this is foolish," protested the Sergeant. "There's no mistake. The Colonel got word about it this very afternoon from Mr. Crisp himself."

"That's correct, Mr. Burgoyne," said Jerry quietly. "And I was told to say that if you are taken only a miracle can save you from the rope. Think well before you decide to risk it. Remember that my warning comes from one who isn't easily alarmed."

"I know, I know." Stephen drew his hand wearily across his brow. "I realize my situation very fully. But my mind is made up, and nothing you can say or do can alter it. Nevertheless, I am deeply grateful to you all for your efforts to aid me."

The distracted Sergeant, driven well-nigh to despair by this unexpected obstinacy, would have protested further, but Jerry silenced him with a look, and rising to his feet, picked up his hat.

"If you are determined, Mr. Burgoyne, there's nothing more to be said," he remarked. "I'll report your decision. I was told that, if you persisted in staying here, I was to ask you to ride out this evening to the clump of trees where your rescue was effected, so as to reach there by six o'clock."

"But it is already nearly five, and the place is a long way from here," objected Stephen, who ached in every muscle of his body, and to whom the prospect of a long ride was decidedly uninviting.

"It's about forty minutes on a good horse," said Jerry. "Is your own horse well yet?"

"Yes."

"Then take him. It's important, Mr. Burgoyne; very important indeed. Another's safety is at stake besides your own."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm not permitted to say more. Will you keep the tryst?"

"I suppose I must in that case." Stephen sighed resignedly. "I will contrive to be there by six or a few minutes after."

Left alone, Stephen sought his own apartment. He flung himself wearily into a chair near the open window, which overlooked the highway, and gave himself up to his unenviable thoughts.

Presently the sound of hoofs outside attracted his attention, and he glanced idly down at the road. Two riders were approaching the inn at a walking pace, one a man and the other a woman, and to his amazement he recognized them as Ned Carless and Lady Meltondene.

A strange companionship surely, thought Stephen. Although he recollected that Lady Meltondene had mentioned Carless's name, he had been unaware that the twain were actually acquainted, and he most certainly never expected to see her out riding with one whom he knew to be a notorious highwayman. Yet, upon reflection, he found the matter less strange than it had at first appeared. To everyone in the district Carless was nothing more nor less than a plain country squire—one who was regarded rather askance by the more stolid section of the community, but who had never been suspected of being guilty of aught more serious than recklessness.

Such a state of things was by no means exceptional at this period. Impoverished gentlemen, many of them honored and respected by their fellows, and who apparently led blameless and uneventful lives, found highway robbery an

easy, though hazardous, means of replenishing their purses; and it is certain that some of them contrived to live their Jekyll and Hyde lives to the natural end, and to leave behind them unblemished reputations.

To the natives of Bolderburn and district Ned Carless was "Th' Squire o' Worpleden." He lived in the house that a Carless had built long over a century ago—a house mortgaged to the hilt certainly, but a house that could surely be home to none but a Carless. Had any of the country folk been told that he was about to wed the fascinating widow Lady Meltondene they would have marvelled, not that so aristocratic a lady should condescend to wed a country squire, but that a Carless should stoop to espouse one whose birth was so much inferior to his own.

As the two riders approached the inn, Stephen observed that something was amiss between them. Carless's expression was scowling and sullen, whilst Lady Meltondene's head was carried high, and a cynical little smile played about the corners of her beautiful mouth. That they had quarrelled was evident, and when Lady Meltondene reined in her horse opposite the inn door, Ned made no effort to circumvent the ostler who ran forward to assist her in dismounting.

"Please don't wait for me, Mr. Carless," Stephen heard her say sweetly. "My business here will probably occupy me for some time."

"You will meet me tomorrow?" Carless's voice matched his expression.

"Perhaps. I cannot say," she replied indifferently, as she slipped gracefully to the ground and stood tapping the palm of her left gauntlet with her riding-whip.

"You must meet me," he cried fiercely, heedless of the bystanders who were watching them curiously.

"Must is a word I never took from any man, Mr. Carless, not even from my late husband," she retorted haughtily,

and, turning, she entered the inn as Carless put spurs to his horse and galloped off down the road like a madman.

Somewhat tardily, the object of Lady Meltondene's call at the inn became apparent to Stephen, and, having no wish to meet her, he sprang to his feet with the intention of seeking refuge in his bedroom. But he was too late. Before he could reach the door someone knocked discreetly on its outer surface, and it opened to admit Lady Meltondene herself.

"You must forgive me for entering unannounced, my dear Stephen," she said coolly, as she closed the door behind her. "But you can scarce blame me. Thrice have I called here since the day when that minx Sylvia Ravenscourt surprised us together, and thrice have I been told that you were out." She seated herself in the chair which Stephen had vacated. "So, as I knew of a certainty that on at least one of those occasions you were in this very room, I was in no mind to take a fourth refusal without an explanation of why you find it necessary to avoid me."

"I should have thought that was obvious," he returned coldly. "I had no desire for a repetition of the scene which Miss Ravenscourt witnessed."

"You thought me over bold that day?" She drew off her gauntlets and tosssed them on to the table.

"Bold is scarcely the word, madam. Unwomanly would be a fitter one."

She laughed harshly. "What despicable creatures men are!" she said scornfully. "The prize they covet is priceless as long as it is unattainable, valueless once they possess it. You would have sold your soul for my kisses when 'twas my will to give them to another; now, when I give them to you unasked, you call me unwomanly."

"You put the matter cleverly, madam, but you awake no contrition in me." His lip curled contemptuously. "You wilfully disregard the many things which an excellent memory will not allow me to forget."

She sighed; then her face softened, and she lifted appealing eyes to his. "Am I not young enough, beautiful enough, desirable enough to make you forget, Stephen dear?" she murmured softly.

"No!"

She shrank before the curt monosyllable as though she had been struck, but she made a further appeal to him—desperately this time, as though she knew that she was fighting a losing battle.

"Give me one more chance, Stephen, just one more chance to prove to you how boundless, how intense my love for you has become. I know what a fool I have been in the past, and God knows that I have paid bitterly for my folly! Don't condemn me too harshly because I didn't recognize love when it came to me. I was young and inexperienced, wilful and vain; my head had been turned by admiration. But I am wiser now. I know that without love life is an empty husk, and I plead for the gift that I thoughlessly cast aside, not knowing what I did."

He would have stopped her, but she paid him no heed.

"I do not ask much, Stephen. Here in the north you and I are remote from our own world. Here we have an opportunity of meeting constantly, away from the prying eyes and malicious tongues of London. If we seize that opportunity, 'twill not take you long to discover whether or no my love be worthy and true. A month, a fortnight, a week will convince you. Give me that week, Stephen dear. Be with me for seven long, wonderful days, and I vow that never again will you wish to leave my side nor I yours."

She had not moved whilst she had been speaking, but now she flung out both her hands in supplication, and lifted passionate, tear-filled eyes to his. But she saw not a hint of compassion in the hard face above her; and her hands dropped to her sides and the ready tears coursed down her

cheeks as she awaited the reply that would ring the knell of all her fondest hopes.

It came at last—in cold, measured tones that froze the very heart within her.

"I have already discovered all I wish to know about you, Barbara," he said; "aye, far more than all. I do not doubt that, in your own peculiar way, you love me. But you have loved others in the same way, a considerable number of others——"

"No, no, not in the same way, Stephen," she cried, in agonized accents.

He disregarded her interruption. "Were you the only woman left alive on earth, beautiful and seductive as you are, you would be powerless to quicken my pulses by a beat," he pursued. "We have naught in common, Barbara. And for the peace of mind of both of us it would be best if, in the future, we were strangers to each other."

For a moment she sat white and listless, stricken by despair. Then the curves of her mouth changed into a thin red line, and she rose to her feet and confronted him.

"Is that your final word, Stephen?" she asked.

"It is, madam."

"Does it count for nothing with you that what chanced in Sylvia Ravenscourt's presence has compromised me past redemption?"

"I am indifferent, madam. You knew full well the consequences of what you did if you failed in your purpose, and you acted deliberately, with ruthless disregard for my unenviable position in the matter."

She shrugged her shoulders. "So be it," she said. "Your blood be upon your own head."

He laughed. "Melodrama suits you, Barbara," he said tolerantly.

"You will probably find that my melodrama is your tragedy," she retorted fiercely, her eyes blazing and her fists clenched. "There can be no middle course for you and

me, Stephen. We must either love or hate, and if you choose the latter you must take the consequences."

"And what are the consequences, pray?" His contemptuous smile raised her anger to fever heat.

"For you the gallows and for me the intense pleasure of knowing that no other woman—not even Averill Stapleton—will ever call you husband."

"The gallows!" he echoed, retreating a pace before her vehemence, and eyeing her askance.

"Aye, the gallows." She laughed harshly and mirthlessly. "A word from me will send you there."

"Indeed." His nonchalance was admirable, and the hand with which he idly toyed with the quizzing glass which hung by a ribbon from his neck betrayed no tremor.

"Aye, in very deed," she retorted. "I will spend the reward on flowers for the grave into which they will eventually fling you after the flesh has rotted from your bones, Mr. Highwayman."

"'Tis kind of you, madam. You suspect me, then, of being one of the two criminals described on the proclamation without, eh?"

"No, I do not suspect; I know. You and Ned Carless are the wanted men. I was in the coffee-room below when the two of you returned after your escape. You were indiscreet, sir, both of you. The window was open, and I heard every word you said. Lest you think I lie, let me repeat some of your own words. 'Methinks the wisest course would be to keep close for a day or two until the hue and cry has died down.' You remember them, Stephen?"

"I do, madam," he said, with studied indifference. "Well?"

"My testimony against you will hang you," she said viciously.

"Probably it will if you give it," he agreed lightly.

"But ere you can lodge your information with the authorities I can be many miles from here if I choose."

"Ah! You would run away," she sneered contemptuously. "Cowardice is an unsuspected trait in your character."

He shrugged his shoulders. "And will continue to be so, I trust," he said indifferently.

"Let us hope so." She smiled cynically. "Yet he who runs away is usually suspect."

"Have no fear; I shall not run away," he declared grimly. "An your assassins want me they will find me here, madam."

Fear gleamed for a moment in her eyes at his unexpected assertion, and she gazed at him in uncertain wonderment.

"You propose to make no effort to prevent these men from arresting you?" She spoke incredulously.

"That is another matter, madam." He smiled. "What will happen if they seek to take me time alone can disclose, but I shall certainly not make any attempt to hide from them."

That she was puzzled was obvious, and she sat for awhile in contemplative silence, drumming lightly upon the table with her finger-tips. Then the clock chimed, and the sound recalled to Stephen's mind the tryst which he had made.

"Madam, I pray you allow me to take my leave," he said. "I must to horse at once, else I shall be late for a most pressing engagement."

She rose to her feet abruptly and regarded him with suspicious eyes. "Another woman, eh? One more attractive than I am, I suppose," she snapped.

"No, madam, a man," he returned coldly. "A man to whom I am vastly indebted."

"Ah! forgive me, Stephen," she cried penitently. "I am a jealous fool. I will go now; perhaps at some future time I may find you in more friendly mood towards me." She spoke meaningly. "Yet before I go I should like to make a

bargain with you. I can command great influence hereabouts. It is in my power not only to prevent your arrest, but to compel Crisp to withdraw his proclamation and to cease his activities against you for good and all."

He raised his eyebrows. "And pray how would you accomplish that?" he asked sceptically.

She smiled enigmatically. "That must be my secret, Stephen," she said softly. "But I can do it if you say the word."

"And what word do you wish me to say, Barbara?"

"A very easy one," she murmured. "You must find time hang heavily on your hands here since Lord Alverford deserted you for Miss Ravenscourt."

"I do, a little," he admitted.

"And all I ask is that you will promise to devote to me three hours of each day for the next week."

"To what purpose?"

She took a step towards him. "That I may fan to flame the embers of your old love for me," she breathed. "I know that I can do it, Stephen."

"And if I refuse?" The question was asked in level tones which betrayed nothing.

"If you be so incredibly foolish, Stephen, I shall go to the High Constable and tell him all I know."

"You are determined on that, Barbara?"

"I am," she replied resolutely.

He strode to the door and flung it wide. "Then go, madam!" he cried. "And I wish you joy of your task."

Without another word he strode from the room, and a few minutes later Barbara, sitting nerveless and stricken in the chair into which she had sunk, heard the clatter of his horse's hoofs as he cantered away towards the north.

CHAPTER XVI

IN WHICH A HANDKERCHIEF PLAYS A MOMENTOUS PART

THE minutes passed slowly by, and the large hand of the solmen-faced grandfather clock had completely circled the dial before Barbara Beltondene roused herself from her lethargy.

Stephen's unbending attitude, and his uncompromising refusal of her offer, had literally stupefied her. For, despite what had chanced at their former meeting, she had felt supremely confident of eventually gaining her way with him. Rendered by her many triumphs vain and egotistical to a degree, she had almost come to believe it beyond any man's power to resist her for long if she exerted herself to conquer him; and she had thought that the strength of Stephen's former impassioned devotion to her, reinforced by the sharp weapon which her knowledge of his secret gave her, made her victory doubly certain. How could a young and vigorous man refuse the amazing dual gift of his own life and the love of one of the most beautiful and seductive women in England? Yet Stephen had refused it—refused it with scorn and contempt, leaving her alone with the bitter knowledge that she, the spoilt darling of Fortune, had failed finally and ignominiously to win the one thing in life that could have given her true and lasting happiness.

At last she lifted up her head and gazed listlessly round the room in which she had no right to be sitting. It was so obviously a man's room. Apart from herself and the gloves which she had thrown on to the table, there was not a feminine thing in it.

Yet even as this thought crossed Barbara's mind her wandering glance caught the gleam of something white which lay on the floor near the door. It was a handkerchief which had fallen unnoticed from Stephen's pocket as he made his abrupt exit, and now Barbara, once more alert, rose quickly from her chair and picked it up. And as she did so her eyes became hard and steely, and her mouth set in cruel, disfiguring lines.

The handkerchief was small and bordered with lace. This was not unusual with the handkerchiefs of fashionable gentlemen, and it was neither its size nor its daintiness that awakened Barbara Meltondene's tigerish rage. Two initials were the cause of this—an A and an S, which were embroidered on one corner of the frail fabric.

So Averill Stapleton had been here, thought Lady Meltondene, leaping swiftly to the obvious but erroneous conclusion. And not very long ago either, else Stephen had found the handkerchief himself. The sly minx had actually started visiting him then! The affair had very certainly progressed much farther than she, Barbara Meltondene, had suspected. Herein lay the explanation of Stephen's attitude towards her! It was not her own charms which had failed her; she had been forestalled by another who, acting with a precipitation for which Barbara would never have given her credit, had snatched the prize which she coveted.

Well, her triumph would be short-lived. 'Twould be a pretty sight for Averill Stapleton to see her affianced lover hanging by the neck! For so he would hang if Barbara thought fit to give evidence against him.

A vindictive smile marred Barbara's beauty. Anyone watching her as she stood slowly and ruthlessly tearing the handkerchief to shreds would have known that she had formed a grim and relentless resolution. At that moment her face was a hideous caricature of itself, and the laugh

which issued from her lips as she flung the lace fragments from her was the laugh of a heartless crone.

The crushed and tattered pieces of fabric fluttered down to the carpet. They were all that remained of what had been Stephen's most cherished possession, for the handkerchief was the one with which Averill had bathed his wrists when he lay captive in her uncle's loose-box. He had contrived to steal it—cleverly, as he thought, but not sufficiently so as to escape Averill's quick eyes. But she had said no word of protest; the romantic folly of the theft had thrilled her, and she had left him in ignorance of the fact that she had seen him surreptitiously wring the water from it and place it in the inside pocket of his coat.

It was the finding of the handkerchief that had brought resolution to Barbara's mind. Without it she might have shrunk from encompassing the dishonor and death of the man she loved, but with it every evil passion which jealously may breed was born in her on the instant. The horror of what she was about to do, instead of repelling her, gave her a malignant satisfaction; and she laughed again as she began to draw on her gloves.

At that moment heavy footsteps sounded in the passage, and without preliminary knock the door was thrust open.

Barbara turned sharply to find the High Constable confronting her, a look of bewildered astonishment on his face. Behind him she could see two of his men, half crouching, with cocked pistols held ready in their hands.

"Your—your pardon, Lady Meltondene," stammered Mr. Crisp apologetically, as he bowed in sycophantic homage. "I—er—perhaps I have been misinformed. I seek Mr. Burgoyne. Is not this his apartment?"

"It is," replied Barbara coolly. "Have you come to arrest him?"

Mr. Crisp crimsoned with annoyance, but his regard for the lady's exalted station checked the retort that sprang to his lips.

"That I cannot——" he began, but Barbara interrupted him impatiently.

"I know all about it, Mr. Crisp," she said. "Mr. Burgoyne left here over an hour ago."

But before Mr. Crisp could reply Sir Randolph Gorst, his battered face aflame with rage, strode into the room and thrust him to one side.

"So ho! it's her ladyship of Meltondene, is it?" he cried. "What in the fiend's name are you doing here, madam?"

She smiled superciliously at him. "I might, perhaps with more right, ask the same question of you, Sir Randolph," she retorted serenely.

"'Tis easily answered, madam," he said grimly. "I came to see your old lover, Buck Burgoyne, arrested for highway robbery."

"Ah! Then you are disappointed, sir."

"For the moment only, I think. Where is he?"

"I haven't the faintest idea."

"Do you expect me to believe that?" he shouted angrily. "You lying Jezebel! I know you of old, Barbara Meltondene, and I have no scruples in dealing with your kind. Either you tell the truth, or I'll——"

He literally choked with passion as, his hand upraised threateningly, he took a quick step towards her. But she did not flinch. Instead she drew herself up to her full height, and the eyes which met his own were agleam with a superb scorn.

"You don't change very much, Randolph," she said, her lip curling disdainfully. "You are still the same gallant, chivalrous gentleman, it seems."

Her words goaded him to madness. That he would have struck her there is no doubt had not Mr. Crisp, scandalized beyond measure by his patron's conduct, boldly slipped between them.

"Gently, Sir Randolph, gently," he said soothingly. "Lady

Meltondene will, I am sure, give us such information as she may possess."

"She shall answer my question," declared Gorst obstinately, though somewhat chastened by Mr. Crisp's interference.

"I have answered it," said Barbara coldly. "And truthfully too." Suddenly her eyes blazed. "You imbecile! Do you think to use force with me? You have tried it before, and methinks it availed you little. Had that blow fallen, Sir Randolph Gorst, you had sealed my lips for good and all, and without my testimony you would find it no easy matter to prove anything against Stephen Burgoyne."

The anger fell from Gorst like a discarded cloak, and Mr. Crisp's eyes shone with excitement.

"You can help us then, Lady Meltondene?" cried the High Constable eagerly.

"I can if I choose," she replied calmly.

"And will you?"

A slow smile broke about the corners of her mouth. "That depends upon Sir Randolph," she said.

"How?" Gorst had turned surly, and he snapped out the word ill-temperedly.

"Before I speak a word you must apologize to me for forgetting on two occasions how a lady should be treated," she said sweetly.

"And what if I don't apologize?"

She shrugged her shoulders. "Then I shall bid you a very good day, and leave you to your own devices." She flashed at him a threatening glance. "And woe betide you if you attempt to prevent my going, sir!"

For a moment he stood scowling at her; then his eyes lighted with suspicion. "'Tis a small price you ask—an unusually small price for you," he said offensively. "You set a high value on your services as a rule, madam. And there was a time when you professed to love this man whom you now propose to betray."

"I await your apology, Sir Randolph," she reminded him serenely.

He hesitated, but an imploring glance from Mr. Crisp decided him. "Very well; have it your own way," he said ungraciously. "I apologize—you hellcat!" he added, under his breath.

"That is a little better, sir, and possibly 'tis as much as you are capable of," she said. "And now tell me why you seek to encompass Stephen Burgoyne's ruin, Randolph."

"Because I hate him," he replied, with vindictive promptitude.

"Ah! Then we are birds of a feather."

"What! You hate him, too, Barbara? Why?"

"For reasons of my own which must remain my own. But they are sufficient—more than sufficient. Be seated, gentlemen, and I will tell you what I know."

The eyes of the two men gleamed as they listened to Barbara's short but damning story. The one saw within his grasp the means to dispose of his enemy for good and all; the other heard in imagination the encomiums which would be showered upon his name by all good citizens for his cleverness in bringing to justice a malefactor so elusive and aristocratic.

"You are prepared to swear to this before the justices, Lady Meltondene?" Mr. Crisp was eagerness personified as he asked the question.

"When and where you will, Mr. Crisp," replied Barbara succinctly.

"Gad, Barbara! but you are a good hater," said Gorst admiringly, appraising her with eyes that had begun to burn with an unpleasant light. "If you can give love in the same measure, the man to whom you give it will know heaven before his time."

She withered him with a glance. "Hell is more like to be your portion, Randolph—both here and hereafter," she retorted coldly.

"I am not so sure of that, Barbara," he said meaningly, the smouldering fire in his eyes leaping to flame under their half-closed lids. "After all, the flower which blooms close at hand is often more fragrant than that which grows out of reach," he continued, with apparent irrelevance.

"And pray what may that mean?" she queried sharply.

"It may mean anything or nothing," he replied enigmatically. "Time will show, Barbara. At present we are concerned with Burgoyne. You are sure he hasn't taken fright and flown?"

"I am certain," she answered positively. "Had he intended to do that, he would have done it long ago. And ere he left me he declared he would return."

"Why did he make such a declaration?" asked Gorst suspiciously.

"That is my affair, sir. Let it suffice that he made it."

"Then you think our best course is to await him here?"

"That is as you please. He will certainly come back here sooner or later."

"And what of his companion, the man with whom you saw him on the day following the crime? Did you know him?"

"I didn't see him clearly." She lied convincingly. "He was hidden from me by the angle of the wall, and when he rode away I saw only his back."

"How was he clothed?"

"That I cannot say." She yawned. "I was not sufficiently interested in him to notice his dress."

"Hum! Burgoyne rode north when he went out just now, you say?" Gorst was eyeing her keenly. He had begun to suspect that she was deceiving them, but he could not make her uncompromising denunciation of Stephen accord with his suspicions.

"He did. And that is all I know of his movements."

Gorst turned to the High Constable. "How many men have you here, Crisp?" he asked.

"A round dozen besides ourselves," answered Mr. Crisp.

"Then send half of them after him. If they don't sight him ere the darkness falls let them return here. That's all right, man," he continued impatiently, as Mr. Crisp began to murmur against this proposed division of his forces. "Eight of us are surely enough to arrest him if he return. Go and give your orders."

With an ill grace Mr. Crisp went to do his patron's bidding, and as the door closed behind him, Gorst leaned forward and gazed keenly into the beautiful face before him,

"Are you playing straight or crooked, Barbara?" he queried.

"That is a point you must decide for yourself," she returned nonchalantly. "No protestations of mine would convince you if you doubt me."

"Hum!" Sir Randolph stroked his chin and pondered awhile. Then he said: "I suppose we must trust you."

"Either fully or not at all," snapped Barbara.

"Very well," he capitulated. "That makes us allies, Barbara. Once upon a time we were friends; can we not be so again?"

She turned on him swiftly with a haughty disdain which intensified her beauty and made her appear doubly desirable to the gloating eyes of the man sitting there.

"Never!" she cried vehemently. "I am become your ally for my own purposes, but no power on earth could persuade me to become your friend. We are merely acquaintances, drawn together momentarily by the web of circumstances, and more than that we shall never be. 'Twill save unpleasantness if you will please remember it."

He smiled easily. "I'll remember it, madam, never fear," he replied tolerantly. "You will doubtless tell me when I am at liberty to forget it."

CHAPTER XVII

TELLS HOW STEPHEN AGAIN FOUND HIMSELF CAPTIVE

BLACK despair rode cheek by jowl with Stephen as he went to keep his tryst which Jerry Dodd had made for him. For his foolish and persistent obstinacy was like to prove his slayer. Deep down in his heart he bitterly regretted his braggart vows to stay in Bolderburn until Averill Stapleton had capitulated to him. His wooing of her—if wooing it could be called—had been nothing more nor less than a series of disastrous episodes in which he had invariably appeared to the worst possible advantage; and they had inevitably culminated in her being, at this moment, infinitely more aloof from him than she had been on the very first day he saw her. She disliked him, she distrusted him, and she despised him—a pretty situation indeed!

Yet in spite of all this he was deliberately imperilling his life to be near her! Was there in all the universe such another fatuous fool as he? Why had he refused to heed the warning which she herself had sent him? Surely that warning, coming as it did from her, had absolved him from those imbecile vows. Had he accepted that absolution, it had been an easy matter to disappear for a while and to return at a later date, when Crisp would, in all probability, have forgotten his very existence. Yes, but to do that he would have been compelled, for the nonce, to leave that pestilent villain Gorst without a rival—for, since the arrival of Miss Ravenscourt, Alverford could no longer be regarded as such—and he shuddered to think that Averill might succumb to the salacious passion of such a man. That was

the crux of the matter. Tardily he admitted to himself that it was not his vows alone that kept him; to them must be added this haunting dread that Averill might think fit to give herself to another during his absence.

Still, it was scarcely credible that she would willingly become the wife of a man of Gorst's calibre; she was too clear-headed for that, too good a judge of character. But was she? Had she not already misjudged Stephen himself most woefully? And besides, how could he depart and take with him the knowledge that she believed him to be the lover of Barbara Meltondene? Barbara Meltondene! Damn the woman! She had caused him more agony of mind, more trouble, than anybody he had ever met, and he cursed her from his very soul.

This unpleasant reverie was at length cut short by the hail of a familiar voice, and, raising his bent head, Stephen saw that he was abreast of the clump of trees of which Jerry had spoken. But for the friendly hail he would have passed it by, so lost was he in his gloomy musings.

A tinker's cart, which he instantly recognized, was drawn up by the roadside. The tinker himself stood beside his browsing donkey, and he looked up with shrewd eyes at the glum countenance of the horseman who now reined in his mount before him.

"Lor' love me boots, but ye look desprit down'earted, sir, swelp me!" he said, with gentle raillery. "Whatever's the matter, now?"

"Matter enough and to spare," growled Stephen. "But that will keep. I came here to meet Ned. Have you seen him?"

"Aye, I've seen 'im all right," replied the tinker, scratching his ear. "An 'e's just about as j'yous an' 'appy as you are. Ye ain't a-goin' to a funeral now, are ye, the pair o' ye? Or to one o' them tea-parties?"

"No," replied Stephen, laughing despite himself.

"Ah! Then ye've quarrelled." The tinker shook his

head dolefully. "That's it, ye've quarrelled. Ye're both tarred wiv the same brush, you an' Ned; wilful an' obstinate as Adam there, both on ye. Ye wus born to be friends, but ye wus born to quarrel too; nothink else ain't to be expected no'ow. What is it? A woman?"

"There is no quarrel between us nor the likelihood of one, William," said Stephen impatiently. "Ned sent for me to meet him here at six o'clock, and here I am."

"Aye, 'ere ye are right enough," agreed the tinker, sighing. "'Arf an hour late, too, ye'll observe, Mr. Burgoyne; an' Ned doesn't take kindly to bein' kept waitin', 'im bein' an impatient sort o' cove, d'ye see?"

"I'm sorry I'm late, but I could not help it. Has Ned gone, then?"

"Aye, 'e's gone, but not so far. It ain't what ye might call diplomatic for 'im to be seen waitin' about on the public road—not nowadays anyway." The tinker looked sharply up and down the deserted highway, and then he pointed to a hillock which rose above the surrounding moor some few hundred yards away. "D'ye see that there little 'ill, sir? Well, Ned's be'ind that a-waitin' for ye, an' I'll bet 'e's a-cussin' of ye till 'e's blue in the face for keepin' 'im kickin' 'is 'eels till now."

"Thank you, William. But why in heaven's name didn't you tell me that at once?" asked Stephen irritably, as he prepared to depart.

"Becos' I wanted to make sure as there wasn't goin' to be no trouble atwixt ye, d'ye see?" explained the tinker, smiling shrewdly. "If I'd 'ave found as there was like to be ructions—an' ye both of ye look like ructions—I should 'ave reckoned as Ned couldn't wait for ye, an' ye'd 'ave gone 'ome again an' no 'arm done, d'ye see?"

He watched Stephen as he cantered away across the moor, and he shook his head as he saw him disappear behind the knoll.

"There's trouble brewin', Adam," he said solemnly,

addressing his donkey. "Pints, gallons, oceans o' trouble! An' I reckon as it's not quite the sort o' trouble as Mr. Burgoyne expects, neither, swelp me!"

Stephen was somewhat surprised to find Jerry Dodd with Carless. The two men were sitting together behind the knoll, holding the bridles of their horses to prevent them from straying and being observed from the road. As he dismounted he noted the black frown which disfigured Carless's face, and he concluded therefrom that the highwayman had not yet recovered from the mood of which the tinker had spoken.

"You are late, Burgoyne." The words were curt and flicked Stephen's temper on the raw.

"'Twas unavoidable," he returned shortly. "I was delayed."

Carless sneered openly. "I know it," he said meaningly. "I'll wager you were not ill-pleased to be delayed, either."

"What mean you?" There was anger in the words—an anger which was answered instantly by the flame which leaped in Carless's eyes.

"I mean what I say," he retorted. "For myself, I should have been charmed beyond measure had I been given the same cause for delay."

Here Jerry, who was watching the two men closely, thought it expedient to interfere.

"Is it wise to linger here, Ned?" he interposed unceremoniously. "If Crisp is up to time he must be at the inn by now, and he is sure to set out in pursuit of Mr. Burgoyne without delay."

"Had Mr. Burgoyne been punctual there would have been no need for haste," retorted Carless sourly. "But you are right. Let us away. Be good enough to follow us, Burgoyne."

For an instant Stephen hesitated, undecided whether to obey or to return the way he had come. Carless paid him no heed, but mounted his horse and rode away without so

much as a glance in his direction; but Jerry was less precipitate. He had noted Stephen's indecision, and it alarmed him.

"Don't be a fool, Mr. Burgoyne," he said urgently. "Ned means well and seeks only to help you. Take no notice of his manner; he has had much to upset him of late. Mount your horse, and think no more about it."

Thus urged, Stephen reluctantly did as Jerry advised, and the two men galloped away in Carless's wake. And gallop they had to, regardless of the uneven and treacherous surface, for Carless rode like a very fiend. His mount was a good one, a thoroughbred roan mare, and she spurned the broken ground beneath flying feet in a manner that called for admiration for both herself and her rider.

" 'Fore gad! he is in a mighty hurry," grumbled Stephen, when they had proceeded thus for over a mile.

"He has good cause for haste, believe me," returned Jerry drily.

"Wither go we?" asked Stephen.

"In the first instance, to Simister's Barn. You have been there before, I think."

"Is it the place to which I was taken after my rescue?"

"It is. There Ned will unfold certain plans which he has made for your benefit, and if you will take my advice you will refrain from running counter to him in any one particular."

Coming at last to the barn, Stephen and Jerry dismounted and, following their leader's example, led their horses inside. The highwayman, who had arrived some minutes before them, was seated upon an upturned pail gloomily staring at the crumbling wall before him. He turned his head as they entered, and watched them tether their horses alongside his mare. Then he bade Jerry close the door, which done, he motioned his companions to seat themselves on a couple of empty boxes which stood opposite to him.

"Now, Burgoyne, I want you to listen carefully, and to

answer without quibble any questions I may ask," he said, with quiet emphasis. "You are in pretty desperate straits, as you are doubtless aware. Why then did you disregard the warning to make yourself scarce which I sent by Jerry?"

Stephen flushed slightly. "Because I had made a vow to remain in Bolderburn until—until the end of August," he replied, with obvious embarrassment.

"But, why, i' gad's name, should you pledge yourself thus?" asked Carless, his eyes wide with surprise.

"I—I cannot explain, Ned," he answered lamely. "'Twas done without thought of the consequences, and I have already rued it."

"Hum! Well, I shall have to ask you to break it, that is all," said Carless, shrugging his shoulders.

"That I cannot do, Ned."

"Yet you must." Carless's tone was decisive. "The time has come when nice points of honor can no longer be considered, Burgoyne. But for your coming here to meet me you had now been captive again, with no possibility of rescue and no hope of escape. You realize that?"

"Very fully."

"That is well. Now, 'tis my belief that once in Crisp's clutches nothing could save you from the extreme penalty of the law. Neither influence nor wealth would avail you, Burgoyne."

"I know it."

"Then why do you behave like a fool?" demanded Carless testily. "Such vows as yours are usually made to pander to the empty whim of some thoughtless woman, and I'll wager that yours is no exception."

"That is my affair," retorted Stephen, his face flushing again—this time with anger. "And I'll trouble you not to interfere in matters which don't concern you."

"Sits the wind in that quarter, eh?" Carless laughed in vexation. "By God, Burgoyne, but you try my temper past endurance! For what purpose do you think I have

gone to so much trouble to get you free and to keep you free? Answer me that."

The anger faded from Stephen's face. "Your reminder is timely, Ned," he said contritely. "I must appear deuced ungrateful. Yet I cannot break my vow."

"Very well; I must break it for you," said Carless grimly. "You are no longer free, my friend."

"What mean you?" queried Stephen sharply.

"I mean that you are my prisoner. From this moment you will do exactly as I tell you, otherwise——" and Carless shrugged his shoulders significantly.

"But this is an outrage!" protested Stephen hotly. "You cannot keep me prisoner against my will."

"I can and I will!" declared Carless. His eyes gleamed ominously, and all at once Stephen found himself staring into the muzzle of a double-barrelled pistol. "Listen to me. I am not bluffing, Burgoyne. From what I have heard during the past few hours it appears to me that if you are taken my own arrest will most certainly follow. Now, I have no mind to hang by the neck yet awhile; I still find life sufficiently sweet to make death unwelcome. Hence I shall have not the slightest compunction in using this pistol if you make it necessary."

"You would shoot me in cold blood?" cried Stephen incredulously.

"You forget my trade, sir," retorted Carless, with a hard laugh. The set of his mouth and the tone of his voice left Stephen in no doubt as to his grim sincerity. "I am an outlaw. As such, the hand of every law-abiding citizen is against me, and when 'tis a case of my life or another's, you can scarce blame me if I take the other's."

"Then you have already committed murder," Stephen flashed at him.

Carless smiled. "Not yet, Burgoyne. Up to now I have been fortunate. But if you do not give me implicit

obedience you will certainly be my first victim. Have I your parole that you will make no attempt to escape?"

"No, you have not," snapped Stephen.

"As you please." He waved his hand negligently; and before Stephen could offer any effective resistence Jerry had leapt upon him and borne him to the ground. He struggled violently, but the cold pressure of the pistol barrels in the back of his neck, and the colder voice which bade him lie still, made him cease his exertions, and within a minute he found himself lying on his back with his hands and feet securely trussed.

"You are really very obstinate, Burgoyne," remarked Carless, in accents of weariness. "Remember that you brought this upon yourself, and that a word from you will release you from your bonds. And I promise you that naught else will avail you. Jerry has infinite skill with rope. Prop him up with his back to the wall, Jerry."

The ex-trooper did as he was bidden, seizing the opportunity to whisper a further warning into Stephen's ear.

"For God's sake, be careful!" he breathed. "He is in deadly earnest; I know him. Make the best of it, man, and do as he asks."

But Stephen preserved an obstinate silence; and after a minute or two Carless sighed, and taking a watch from his fob, regarded it fixedly.

"In ten minutes we must be away from here," he said. "But before we go, you and I must have a little further talk, Burgoyne. Jerry, go you down the lane and keep watch. Warn me if there be anything unusual; otherwise don't return until you see me standing in the doorway."

Obediently Jerry left the barn, closing the door carefully behind him.

"Now, sir, I have a proposition to make," said Carless. "If you will give me your word of honor to return to London with all possible despatch you are free to depart at once. 'Tis unlikely that the hue and cry will follow you

so far, and even if it did, Crisp would find infinite difficulty in persuading the authorities in London to arrest the famous Mr. Burgoyne on such representations as he could make. Indeed, I doubt very much if he would make the attempt, particularly if he were to receive a little present of, say, fifty guineas, sent him from an unknown source to console him for the loss of his prize."

"And if I do not give you my word?" queried Stephen, with as much dignity as his ignominious position permitted.

"Then you will put me to an infernal lot of trouble, for I shall be compelled to take you along with me and to keep you in hiding willy-nilly."

"You would find the task both irksome and difficult, I fear," remarked Stephen, smiling sceptically.

"Oh, as to that, 'twould be easy to dispose of you whenever I thought fit," retorted Carless nonchalantly.

"You mean you would murder me?"

"That is for the future to decide."

"Why are you so anxious to keep me out of Crisp's clutches? You surely would not have me believe that your motives are entirely unselfish?" The questions were asked in Stephen's most offensive manner, but they had no effect upon his companion.

"Most certainly not," he returned lightly. "If I have conveyed to you that impression I ask your pardon, for it was far from my intention to do so. Your safety means my safety; that is the case in a nutshell. It has come to my ears that someone, doubtless a tool of Sir Randolph Gorst's, has informed Crisp that you and I were seen together shortly after the escape. You will recollect my conviction that Gorst dare not betray me lest he betray himself. That conviction remains unshaken, but it seems to me that if I were charged on evidence other than his, then he would be safe, for it is unlikely that anybody would pay much attention to any accusation I might then make against him. On the other hand, if you fall into the High Constable's clutches,

it will not be long ere Crisp will be subtly urged to arrest me on suspicion, and 'tis my belief that he will not need much urging, for there is no love lost between us."

"But what could he prove against you?"

"Little at first, maybe, but it would be many weeks before either you or I were brought to trial. In those weeks neither Crisp nor Gorst would be idle; and in my opinion the information which you would be compelled to divulge at your trial, together with such evidence as Crisp would by that time possess, would be enough to hang me as high as Haman."

"Good gad! do you think I would betray you?" cried Stephen indignantly.

"Not I. I know you too well for that. But I know those damned lawyers, too. They would harass you and question you, set their nasty snares for your feet, until, from sheer weariness, you would fall into one of their traps and unwittingly speak the word that would pronounce my doom."

"Never! I am not such a fool as you think me, Ned. I am quite prepared to match my wits against the best lawyer of them all."

Carless shook his head. "You don't know them as I do, Burgoyne. Anyway, I am not prepared to risk it.

A sudden thought flashed across Stephen's mind, and he gazed at his companion keenly. "If I go to London, Ned, what will you do?" he asked slowly.

"Why, return to my home, of course," replied Carless, looking his surprise at the question. "All danger will be past for me."

"Are you sure of that?"

"Certainly I am." His glance caught the other's gaze and he paused. Then he said: "What's the matter? What is't you fear?"

Stephen did not immediately reply. His brain was work-

ing rapidly, and when at last he spoke his brow was wrinkled in deep thought.

"Before I left my apartment this evening Lady Meltondene called to see me," he said slowly.

The dark flush which mantled Carless's cheeks and the peculiar gleam which came into his eyes warned Stephen that he had broached a delicate topic.

"I know it," said Carless grimly. "She left me outside the inn with that object."

"Well, ere we parted she let fall some disconcerting information. She knows that you and I are the men described in Crisp's proclamation."

"What! She knows?" cried Carless incredulously. "But how can she know?"

"She was in the coffee-room when we reached the Nag's Head after our escape, and she overheard every word we said."

Carless whistled. "And a woman's secret is nobody's secret," he said. "Hum! This complicates matters. And she told you this?"

"She did."

Abruptly Carless's mood changed again, and he eyed Stephen with an ominous frown. "Why did she tell you?" he demanded curtly.

The question disconcerted Stephen, and he hesitated, searching for a fitting reply. His hesitation had a strange effect on Carless. He sprang to his feet in sudden fury, and with eyes blazing and fists clenched, he stood over his helpless prisoner in the attitude of a wild animal about to spring upon its prey.

"You are dumb, eh?" His voice was hoarse with passion, and he almost choked over the words. "What is there between Lady Meltondene and you? Answer me. Quick, or by heaven I'll tear the throat out of you!"

Stephen met his fierce gaze calmly. "There is nothing between us—less than nothing," he said contemptuously.

"Then why did she seek you?" cried Carless.

"I have known Lady Meltondene for many years," replied Stephen haughtily. "As to the precise reason for her visit, you had better enquire of her. For the rest, you may go to the devil, sir."

For an instant it appeared to the prostrate man that his captor would fall upon him and rend him to pieces; but with the suddenness which was so characteristic of him, Carless's hands dropped to his sides and he seated himself again on the upturned pail. He sat in brooding silence for perhaps a minute; then he spoke again in his natural voice.

"Lady Meltondene has told me that you were at one time a suitor for her hand," he said evenly. "Is that correct?"

"It is." Stephen wriggled uncomfortably. "But that was, of course, before her marriage."

"And now that she is a widow——"

"She will remain a widow until doomsday if she wait for me," declared Stephen vehemently.

"Ah! Then you no longer care for her?" opined Carless, his face clearing.

"I do not! If you must know, every particle of love that is mine to give is bestowed upon another."

"I rejoice to hear it." There was no mistaking the pleasure in his tones. "But what of Lady Meltondene? Does she love you?"

"Bah! Her love is as unstable as water. No man can hold it for long, or say with certainty that it is his on two consecutive days."

"Have a care, Burgoyne! I will not permit anyone to disparage her."

Stephen eyed him quizzically. "You care for her yourself, Ned," he said accusingly.

"Aye, God help me, I do," admitted Carless despondently. "It doubtless surprises you that one so unworthy, one whom you know for a thief, can lift his eyes so high.

But nobody can help love. It just comes, to high and low alike, and each and all are powerless to resist it. Oh! I know my passion is hopeless, but I am jealous as hell if another man so much as looks at her. I love her with my whole being, and shall do until I die; I would sell my immortal soul to call her mine for one short hour. I am a fool and I know it, but I cannot help it."

He buried his head in his hands, and Stephen, his own misfortunes forgotten, sought for words wherewith to comfort him.

"You are wrong in thinking that I consider you unworthy of her, Ned," he said softly. "The boot is on the other leg. She is not worthy of you."

"What!" ejaculated Carless threateningly. "Think twice ere you say aught against her."

"I repeat that she is not worthy of such a man as you," said Stephen stubbornly. "And I can prove it."

"You had better, Burgoyne, and that quickly!" advised Carless ominously.

"'Tis not my way to malign a woman, yet in this case I have no option. Lady Meltondene came to me today to propose a bargain. What she asked is not for me to say, but she threatened that if I refused her she would tell Crisp all she knew concerning me. Well, I did refuse, and I doubt not that, ere now, the High Constable is in full possession of her testimony against me."

"The spitfire!" There was more admiration than disgust in Carless's tone, and Stephen regarded him in wonderment. "Did she say that she would betray me, too?"

"No. But I don't see how she could betray one without the other."

Carless again looked at his watch, and rose to his feet. "'Tis time to go," he said simply. "Are you for London, Burgoyne? 'Twill make things much easier for us both if you say yes. I ask it for my own sake as much as yours."

"Very well then. London let it be." Stephen capitulated with a profound sigh.

"'Tis a wise choice." Carless took from his pocket a clasp knife and cut Stephen's bonds. Then he strode to the door and, opening it, called softly to Jerry, who quickly appeared in answer to the summons. "Is the coast clear, Jerry?"

"Aye; there's not a soul in sight."

"Good. Mr. Burgoyne is for London, Jerry. You will take him by the route we agreed upon, and don't leave him until he is out of the county." He turned quickly to Stephen. "The precaution is not taken because I doubt you, Burgoyne, but merely for your own safety. Jerry knows Lancashire like a book, and 'tis not wise for you to use the highroad until you are well on your way."

"I understand," said Stephen gravely.

Jerry led the three horses out of the barn, and he and Stephen mounted.

The latter held out his hand to Carless, who clasped it in a close, warm grip. "Good-bye, Burgoyne," he said. "We shall meet again ere long. You may rely upon me to send you word as soon as I consider it safe for you to return here—for I make no doubt that you will be mighty anxious to return," he added with a smile.

"Indeed I shall," confessed Stephen. "Good-bye, Ned. Thank you for all you have done for me; I am not as ungrateful as I may seem. But stay. What are you going to do? Why not come with us? My home is open to you for as long as you care to be my honored guest."

"No, no, Burgoyne. I am bound elsewhere."

"But where?" persisted Stephen, as his impatient horse began to move.

"I go to call on Lady Meltondene!"

And, with a gay laugh, Carless struck Stephen's horse a resounding blow on the flank with the flat of his hand, and, leaping into his own saddle, set out upon his dangerous errand.

CHAPTER XVIII

IN WHICH THE COLONEL IS FIRST WORRIED, THEN AMUSED, AND LAST OF ALL MYSTIFIED

THE heat was overpowering. At least, so thought Colonel Oldfield as he sat in the shade of the summer-house and mopped his brow with a large silk handkerchief.

Even the cool, tinkling splash of the little cascade, which, fed by recent heavy rains, tumbled over rocks and boulders in tumultuous haste to precipitate its waters into the Colonel's ornamental lake, was powerless against the early August sun which held sway in the brassy, cloudless sky; and the Colonel, after much inward debate and many furtive glances in the direction of the arbor, decided that on such an afternoon he might fittingly forget his dignity for a while and remove his coat. This he did surreptitiously, and with as little movement as possible, fearful lest his action should bring down wrath upon his head, for the Lady Averill was adamant on the matter of "shirt-sleeves."

The Colonel grunted with satisfaction as he resumed his seat. It was infinitely more comfortable without that confounded coat. Weather like this demanded concessions in the way of attire, and in any case there was no one to observe his breach of the conventions.

From where he sat the Colonel could see his niece quite plainly. She was reclining in a hammock which Sergeant Ball had erected for her; and as the Colonel watched her he shook his head and sighed. This weather did not agree with Averill. She was listless and distrait, far too pale for

a healthy woman, and it seemed to him that she was thinner than she had been a few months ago. In any case, it was certain that her former high spirits had departed, and her gay laugh was much less ready than it used to be.

Yet, as the Colonel revolved the matter in his mind, he began to doubt if the weather was altogether to blame for Averill's condition. 'Twas only yesterday that the sun had made a welcome reappearance after nearly two weeks of grey skies and rain, whereas the change in Averill had been apparent for some considerable time. Now he came to think about it, 'twas late in the spring when he had first noticed something amiss with her; although during the fortnight which he had spent with her in London in the early part of July she had been gaiety itself, and had flung herself into the social whirl with a zest which he, knowing her distaste for the town's hectic pleasures, had noted with surprise.

The Colonel wrinkled his brow and scratched his head. Women were, and always had been, a puzzle to him! There was no accounting for their moods and whimsies, and 'twas no use a man's interfering. He picked up the long clay pipe which lay on the ground beside him and took out his tinder-box, but in the act of striking steel to flint he paused, and his eyes filled with alarm. Could it be that Averill was slowly sinking beneath the spell of some malignant disease of which he knew nothing? By Jupiter! 'twas more than probable; in fact, the more he thought on it the more certain he became that he had hit upon the only possible explanation.

Thoroughly alarmed, he jumped up from his chair and hurried away to where Sergeant Ball, minus coat, waistcoat, and cravat, and with his shirt wide open at the throat, was busily tying up a rampant creeper to a trellis.

"Have you nearly finished, Sergeant?" he asked gruffly.

The Sergeant looked his astonishment. "Why, no, sir; I ain't only just started."

"Hum! Have you seen Lady Averill today?"

"Yes, sir. She's in that there 'ammick as I put up yesterday, sir."

"I know that, you fool," snapped the Colonel. "I asked if ye'd seen her, not if you know where she is."

He took a step forward, and pretended to examine some of the Sergeant's handiwork. Actually he was seeking words. He wanted to ask Sergeant Ball's opinion and advice as to Averill, but he wanted to do it without giving the Sergeant the satisfaction of knowing that he had approached him for that particular purpose.

"It's very warm, Sergeant," he said at last.

"Aye, it is an' all, sir," agreed the Sergeant cordially.

"Trying weather for young folk, don't ye think?"

"Don't know as it's any more tryin' for young 'uns than it is for old 'uns, sir. Young 'uns, being young, ought to stand it best if you ask me, sir."

"I didn't ask you, you dolt," growled the Colonel irritably. "If I wanted an opinion as between age and youth, I shouldn't be likely to come to a dunderhead like you for it, should I?"

"No, sir," conceded the Sergeant complacently, as he tied another knot securely.

"Very well then. What I meant was that heat like this is not altogether good for young women like—like Lady Averill, for instance."

"Perhaps not, sir."

"Perhaps not! Perhaps not! You know it isn't, you idiot! Can't ye see for yourself how pale, how — how damned languid she is?"

"Aye, I've noticed that, sir. But it ain't the weather, sir."

"No? Then what is it?"

"I'm not sure, sir, but I'll take my davy it ain't the weather. It came long before this 'eat, sir."

"Hum! Then maybe it's measles or—or small-pox or something."

"No, sir, it ain't measles nor yet small-pox. If you ask me it's something far worse nor either of 'em," said the Sergeant solemnly.

"Good gad, Sergeant, what d'you mean?" His apprehension was so great that he seized his companion roughly by the shoulder and swung him round. "Out with it, man! Tell me what you fear; let me know the worst."

"Well, sir, I don't know as you'll altogether agree wi' me," said the Sergeant dubiously.

"Damn it, man, what does that matter? Speak, for heaven's sake!"

"Very good, sir. I reckon as it ain't measles, nor small-pox, nor yet mumps. Some calls it a fever, others calls it madness, but most folks calls it love, sir."

The Colonel stared at his henchman in blank astonishment, eyeing him as though he thought he had suddenly taken leave of his senses. Then the color of his face deepened to a rich purple, his eyes bulged, and his fists became clenched; and the Sergeant prepared himself for the storm that he knew was coming by drawing himself rigidly up to attention.

"Tchah!" The Colonel exploded. "Of all the addle-pated, wooden-headed numskulls it has ever been my luck to meet, commend me to Sergeant Ball! Heaven alone knows how you ever rose to non-commissioned rank. You haven't enough common sense for a drummer-boy; by Jupiter! you haven't. Love, indeed! You might as well say she's teething, damme! Love! Tchah!"

No reply being forthcoming to this outburst, the Colonel stamped his foot and glared at the Sergeant fiercely.

"Well, have you naught to say, you fool?" he demanded.

"Naught, sir—except to repeat that, if you ask me, Miss Averill's in love," replied the Sergeant obstinately.

"Gad! was there ever such a romantic fool?" marvelled

the exasperated Colonel. "Who in the name of fortune can she be in love with? Don't you dare tell me that it's that ninny of an Alverford, or, by Jupiter! I'll knock your thick head off."

"No, it ain't his lordship, sir," said the Sergeant decisively.

"Surely it can't be Sir Randolph Gorst." A note of anxiety dominated the anger in the Colonel's voice. "You don't think it's Gorst, do you? He's no fit husband for a woman like Averill," the Colonel added, under his breath.

"Sir Randolph's a trier, sir," opined the Sergeant, with a thoughtful frown. "He comes here a lot."

"Aye, far too much," growled the Colonel. "I can't understand why she invites the damn fellow here after his disgraceful treatment of that poor devil of a highwayman whom he took prisoner."

A smile flickered across the Sergeant's face, but the Colonel's gaze was elsewhere, and he failed to observe it.

"You've no cause to worry, sir," said the Sergeant. "For all his persistence, Sir Randolph ain't got a twenty to one chance."

"No?" The Colonel brightened perceptibly. "Well, if it isn't Gorst and it isn't Alverford, who the deuce can it be?"

The Sergeant's rigid pose relaxed, and he shuffled his feet uneasily and cleared his throat noisily. "I'd rather not venture no opinion, sir," he said, again clearing his throat.

"You'll do as you're told, you mutinous dog!" cried the Colonel. "Who is it? D'ye hear? Who is it?"

"It's—it's that same highwayman as you spoke of just now, sir."

The words tumbled out of the Sergeant's mouth in a torrent, and he waited in greater trepidation than usual for his master's wrath, for he considered that never before had he ventured so far beyond the bounds of decorum. But to

his intense astonishment the Colonel showed no resentment whatever. Instead, the light of comprehension slowly dawned in his eyes, and suddenly he threw back his head and roared with stentorian laughter.

"By Jupiter! that's a good one, that is," he cried, when his laughter had subsided to a broad smile. "You've hit the nail plumb on the head, Sergeant. You're a deuced discerning fellow and a credit to the service." He laughed again. "It serves the minx right, curse me if it doesn't! She would poke her pretty nose into the affair and give the fellow food, you'll remember. And it serves Gorst right, too, confound him! Foisted his beastly prisoners on to me, instead of taking 'em to gaol straight away, as though I were a damn warder. And Averill goes and falls in love with one of 'em! Ha! Ha! That's a good one."

"You seem pleased sir," ventured the Sergeant, scratching his head in perplexity.

"Pleased! Hum! Ah! Well, I don't know about pleased, Sergeant," ruminated the Colonel. "It's the humor of the thing that strikes me. But pleased——?" The Colonel sighed. "It had to come, you know, Sergeant. We couldn't expect to keep Averill with us always, could we now?"

"No, I suppose not, sir," said the Sergeant despondently. "But perhaps it won't come to anything, sir," he added, brightening a little.

"Don't be a fool!" snapped the Colonel. "If Averill loves him—why, he'll love her. There isn't a man breathing could do otherwise. And love means marriage, and marriage means that she'll leave us."

The two men sighed in unison, and regarded each other dolefully.

"But it might be worse, Sergeant." The Colonel began to smile again. "Aye, it might be much worse."

"Worse, sir!" cried the Sergeant. "But how could it

be worse? You won't never let Miss Averill marry a highwayman, sir, will you?"

Another stentorian laugh broke from the Colonel's lips. "Highwayman!" he shouted mirthfully. "Where were your eyes, man? Where were your brains? Wool-gathering as usual, I suppose. Why, any fool could see with half an eye that he was no highwayman."

"Yes, I know that, sir, but I didn't know whether you'd noticed it, sir," said the Sergeant naively.

The Colonel eyed him sharply, but the Sergeant's expression was utterly guileless.

"Hum! So you knew it, did you? Hum! Then you know who he really is, too, eh?"

"Yes, sir."

The Colonel's astonishment was patent. "Then who is he?" he asked peremptorily.

"Mr. Burgoyne, sir."

"Good! Very good! You're getting deuced astute, Sergeant."

Here the Colonel laughed again, and this time the Sergeant ventured to laugh with him, so that very soon the beautiful, sunlit garden rang with their merriment.

"Pray may I enquire the reason for all this hilarity?"

The laughter ceased abruptly, and the two men turned guilty eyes to where Averill stood regarding them with languid disapproval.

"Did you not hear my question, uncle?" She stamped her foot petulantly. "Why are you making that dreadful noise?"

"'Twas nothing, my dear, nothing at all," replied the Colonel, avoiding her eyes. "The Sergeant made a joke; that was all, my dear, just a joke."

"Indeed! Then I pray you tell me the joke that I may laugh too," she persisted sternly.

"Well, now, I—er—that is, it's a confidential joke, d'ye

see?" stammered the embarrassed Colonel unconvincingly, vigorously mopping his heated brow.

"A confidential joke is a strange type of joke, methinks," she said coldly, regarding the crestfallen pair with unutterable scorn. "Do you tell the Colonel many such, Sergeant?"

The Sergeant smiled in sickly fashion. "Yes, miss—I mean no, miss, leastways I——"

"Don't know what you mean," Averill finished for him. "You need not trouble to find excuses, either of you. But let me remind you that the air is still, the garden is quiet, and your voices are loud! I will say no more but will leave you to ponder over the matter."

She had turned to depart; then a look of horror overspread her face, and she stared at the uncomfortable Colonel incredulously.

"Uncle! Whatever are you thinking about?" she cried. "Where is your coat, sir?"

"Well, you see, my dear, the heat and——"

"Rubbish, sir! You know full well that Sylvia may arrive at any moment, and I vow she would swoon if you received her in your shirt-sleeves."

"Nay, damme, Averill, she's not as squeamish as all that," protested the Colonel. "She's seen me in 'em before, hasn't she? Besides——"

"Besides what, sir?"

"She's coming to stay for a month this time, isn't she?"

"You know she is, or more, if I can persuade her."

"Well, you don't mean to say that you're going to force me to wear a coat all the time she's here in weather like this?"

"Of course I do."

"But, good gad, Averill, suppose it gets hotter still?"

"Whether it be hot or cold you will wear a coat," she declared inflexibly. "And when you have resumed your

discarded attire and made yourself presentable, you may join me in the arbor. I have something to say to you."

She moved away like a queen who has had cause to reprimand unruly subjects, leaving behind her two very rueful individuals.

"By Jupiter, Sergeant! but we're deuced unpopular," breathed the Colonel, when she was out of earshot. "How much d'ye think she'd heard?"

"The Lord knows, sir!" replied the Sergeant, in accents of despair. "Most like all of it, for she came up from behind the hedge."

"Gad, you're a Job's comforter, that you are! Why the devil d'you always look on the black side of everything? You're a cursed melancholy fellow, Sergeant—a positive wet blanket."

"Can't help it, sir," replied the Sergeant stubbornly. "It ain't easy to deceive Miss Averill, sir, as maybe you've noticed."

"Noticed, you idiot? Of course I've noticed," snorted the Colonel. "Go and fetch me my coat, and stop talking damned nonsense."

Colonel Oldfield approached the arbor with the laggard footsteps of apprehension. His niece made a delightful picture as she sat there awaiting him. The dark green framework of rampant foliage which surrounded her threw into delicate relief the soft hue of her thin, pale blue gown, and made of her uncovered hair a burnished, gleaming mass that rivalled the shafts of sunlight which found their way through the thick tangle of leaves and branches. Her expression was pensive and her beauty more ethereal than it had been a few months ago, and the Colonel distinctly heard her sigh as he came near to her.

But her expression changed as she caught sight of him, and she turned on him a look of stern disapproval.

"So you have resumed your coat," she said severely. "That is better. But your hair is dishevelled, and your

cravat is all awry. Come here, sir, and let me put it straight for you."

Obediently the Colonel stood whilst she adjusted his neckwear to her liking, and then, very gently, he put his arms around her and held her close.

"What ails you, lass?" he whispered tenderly. "You are fading away before my very eyes. Won't you tell me what's the matter? There might be something that even an old fool like me can do to help."

To his horror, the Colonel saw quick tears spring to the lovely eyes into which he gazed, and he sensed the inward struggle which Averill fought in her endeavor to control them. But control them she did, to his infinite relief. Then she took his face between her two hands and kissed him once, twice.

"You dear!" she breathed, with a catch in her voice. "I am a sore trial to you, I fear. But because you are the most perfect uncle in the whole world, you never think of me as such. There is nothing really wrong with me, uncle. Of late I have been the victim of a vague discontent, a feeling that I lack something and know not what. But it will pass. When Sylvia has been here an hour I shall have forgotten all about it and be myself again."

"Are you sure of that?" There was a twinkle in the Colonel's eye when he asked the question, but luckily for him she did not notice it.

"Of course. Sylvia always does me good, and you will have no further cause to worry about me."

"Hum! Well, I suppose it will be all right as long as that ninny of a viscount doesn't come dancing attendance on Sylvia and taking her away from you."

A roguish gleam lighted Averill's eyes. "That reminds me," she said. "A messenger arrived an hour ago to say that Lord Alverford returned from town this morning and will call and pay his respects to you tomorrow."

"Damn him and his respects!" cried the Colonel. Then

he paused, and looked searchingly at his niece. "His return seems remarkably opportune—indeed, most suspiciously opportune, madam! You won't expect me to believe that he is unaware that Sylvia comes here today on a visit, will you?"

"Fie, uncle! How can you be so suspicious?" She shook a reproving finger at him. "I vow you are becoming a positive matchmaker."

"Matchmaker! I!" The Colonel choked. "Gad! madam, Alverford'll marry no woman for whom I have any regard if I can prevent it. I'll have him pitched into the road if he shows his face here again, d'ye hear? I'll——"

"You'll behave just as I would have you behave," she reproved him.

"And how is that, madam?" he demanded fiercely.

"Like the most perfect uncle in the world," she replied sweetly. "You don't wish Harry to marry me, do you?"

"By Jupiter! I should think not."

"Very well. If he marry Sylvia you will have no further cause for worry, dear. And if Sylvia be willing, 'twould be absurd for you to interfere."

"But he's such a confounded nincompoop," grumbled the Colonel.

"As to that, methinks you will change your mind some day," prophesied Averill.

"Never, my dear!" he declared emphatically. "But let that pass. There's another matter I'd like to mention, Averill. It's none of my business, I know, but I'd like to have your assurance on the point."

She glanced at him in quick alarm. She had caught the words "Mr. Burgoyne" as she had approached her uncle and the Sergeant, and she now concluded that it was of him that the Colonel was about to speak.

"You are vastly serious," she said, with assumed lightness. "What is't you wish to ask?"

"It's about Sir Randolph Gorst." The Colonel's pre-

occupation prevented his noticing the look of relief that passed over her face, but he observed the rosy flush that followed it. "I don't like the fellow, Averill."

"No?"

"No. He's a—a—well, his reputation is distinctly unsavory, and, although he was popular enough when he first came here, every decent house in the county is now closed to him. He is not the sort of man for you, Averill."

"I know it, uncle," she agreed calmly.

"Then why the devil do you encourage the fellow?" cried the perplexed Colonel.

She flushed again. "I have reasons which appear good to me, uncle, but I cannot tell you those reasons."

"But 'tis foolish, Averill, and it makes folks talk. Besides, you are playing with fire," he warned her.

"I know that, too, sir, but I think I am clever enough not to burn my fingers. And as to folks talking—that is unfortunate, but they must go on talking if it please them to do so."

"You astonish me and perplex me, my dear. Why, even Alverford will no longer tolerate the fellow."

" 'Tis due to Harry that the county has cold-shouldered him." She smiled at him. "You didn't know that, did you, sir? Well, I can tell you no more at present. You must trust me not to make a fool of myself, uncle, for I have not yet finished with Sir Randolph Gorst. But to ease your mind, let me tell you that I dislike him intensely. There, sir; now go and sort the matter out for yourself."

And very meekly the mystified old soldier went.

CHAPTER XIX

BRINGS TEARS TO LADY AVERILL AND JOY TO STEPHEN

"I DECLARE you are not looking your best, Sylvia," announced Averill decidedly, after steadfastly regarding her friend for some time with critical eyes. "I did not notice it last evening when you arrived."

It was a glorious morning—less oppressive than yesterday, but sufficiently warm to be conducive to languor rather than energy. The Colonel had gone to pay his usual visit to the stables; and Averill and her friend, disinclined to spend a moment within doors in such perfect weather, had strolled down to the lake, where they had ensconced themselves on an old semi-circular stone seat in the shade of some trees.

"'Tis a compliment I can repay with interest," retorted Sylvia somewhat sharply. "I never saw you look worse, Averill. And there is more excuse for me than there is for you. I come straight from six weeks in town, whilst you have been rusticating in this Adamless Eden for the past month."

Averill's head was averted, but the sharp eyes of her companion did not fail to note the color which had flooded her face.

"You enjoyed your stay in London, I hope," said Averill hastily.

"Indeed I did." Sylvia clasped her hands ecstatically. "I had the most wonderful time. Theatres, routs, balls, and men—oh! Averill, the men! I vow I never went abroad with an escort of less than six. Poor Harry had

scarce a look in, and I really believe that another week of it had driven him frantic."

"Harry! And pray who may Harry be?"

"Why, Alverford, of course," replied Sylvia lightly.

"Oh! And does he call you Sylvia?" queried Averill drily.

"Good gracious, no! He wouldn't dare anything so human." She shrugged her shoulders in mock despair. "He worships me mostly at a distance. When he chances to be with me he is dumb as an oyster, except for his prodigious and incessant sighing; and if I give him my fan to hold or my hand to kiss, he blushes consumedly as a schoolgirl, and then grows visibly taller and struts like a veritable peacock. But scarce a word does he say. 'Tis vastly annoying!"

"You don't like his conduct, then?"

"Heavens above! I am a woman with red blood in my veins, not a goddess," cried Sylvia petulantly. "He gives me the adoration and deference due to a queen or a Madonna, and I want neither. I vow he irritates me until I feel sometimes that I shall scream."

"Yet I think you ought at least to be flattered," remarked Averill rather coldly. "How would you have him behave?"

"I would have him love me and tell me so. I would have him take me in his arms and hold me close and kiss my lips; that is how I would have him behave."

"Sylvia!" cried the astonished Averill. "What are you saying?"

"I am telling the truth," retorted her friend vigorously. "Oh, I know that 'tis deemed unmaidenly for a girl to say such things. We are supposed to simper and blush and cast down our eyes if we see love in a man's gaze; 'tis considered proper to swoon if he declare his passion ere he has known us at least a year, or before he has told our parents how many pounds, shillings, and pence he possesses or is

likely to possess when some unfortunate relative conveniently dies!"

"You love Harry, then?"

"Of course I do. Why shouldn't I love him, and why shouldn't I confess it? I am proud of my love and of him —not ashamed, like you are."

Averill flushed angrily. "What mean you?" she demanded sharply. "What concern is it of mine?"

"You wilfully misunderstand me, Averill," declared Sylvia, unabashed, and meeting her friend's flashing eyes boldly. "I was referring to your love for Mr. Burgoyne, not to mine for Harry."

"Sylvia! How dare you say such a thing?" cried Averill indignantly.

"Because it is so, and you know it. You cannot deceive me, although you try to deceive yourself. And I think that is ridiculous. The longer you remain wilfully blind, the longer you will be unhappy. For you are unhappy; that is patent, even to the Colonel."

"I am not unhappy!" cried Averill, stamping her foot. "And I think you are horrid, Sylvia."

"No doubt you do. People who speak the truth are notoriously horrid, Averill. By the way, I saw Mr. Burgoyne in London on several occasions."

"I am not interested in Mr. Burgoyne," said Averill haughtily.

"Perhaps not; but I am, and one must talk about something," returned Sylvia pertly. "I must confess I thought him very charming."

"Have you then so soon forgotten his attempt to abduct me?" asked Averill frigidly. "And his shameless behavior with Lady Meltondene of which you yourself were a witness? Charming, you call him. 'Tis a strange kind of charm, methinks!"

Sylvia laughed lightly. "Which is the greater of his crimes in your eyes?" she asked slyly. "His attempt to

carry you off, or his seeking consolation elsewhere after failing to do so?"

Tears of vexation sprang to Averill's eyes. "Your visit to town has not improved you, madam," she cried angrily. "You have left both your manners and your modesty there, methinks, and I dislike you intensely. Indeed, I think I hate you almost as much as I hate the dreadful man whose cause you appear to have espoused. Are you sure that it isn't Mr. Burgoyne whom you love, and not Harry?"

"I am quite sure, dear," said Sylvia sweetly.

"Ah! Perhaps you do not care to enter the lists against a rival so redoubtable as Lady Meltondene."

A spark of anger leaped in Miss Ravenscourt's eyes, but it disappeared as quickly as it came. "'Twould be the joy of my life to pit myself against such a woman," she announced quite sincerely. "But even if I did love Mr. Burgoyne I should have no need to fear her!"

"No?" Averill's tone was supercilious in the extreme. "Why not? Is she then less beautiful, less attractive than the charming Miss Ravenscourt?"

"Faith, no!" Sylvia laughed gaily. "I can't hold a candle to her for looks, or figure, or aught else. But, you see, I chance to know that Mr. Burgoyne has no regard for her whatever."

"Indeed!" Averill sneered. "You have changed your opinion vastly since you went away."

"And with good cause. I fear I misjudged him that day at the inn. Appearances were strongly against him, but I was wrong in taking them at their face value."

"He has explained the matter to your satisfaction, then?" Averill sneered again.

"He has done nothing of the sort," snapped Sylvia. "Not a word has passed his lips on the subject. But Harry has told me several things which put a different complexion on the affair."

"And what has Harry told you?" This time there was curiosity in Averill's tone and eagerness in her face.

"I thought you said you were not interested in Mr. Burgoyne," Sylvia reminded her complacently. "What Harry told me was told in confidence, and I cannot repeat it. By the way, did you not meet Mr. Burgoyne yourself when you were in town?"

"I did." Averill was literally boiling with rage. "Twice."

"Ah! And what happened?"

"Naught."

"Did he not speak to you?"

"He did, but he got no reply!"

"Oh, Averill, how could you use him so?" cried Sylvia reproachfully. "I vow he did not merit such treatment. You are as cruel as you are obstinate, madam."

To Sylvia's amazement Averill's lip dropped, and she suddenly burst into a storm of tears. All contrition in an instant, Sylvia flung her arms around her and pillowed the lovely golden head on her shoulder, alternately kissing the burnished hair and murmuring words of comfort. At last the tears ceased to flow, but Averill did not raise her head from its resting-place.

"Forgive me, Sylvia. I am overwrought," she murmured.

"And I ought to have been more careful what I said," said her contrite friend. "My tongue runs away with me at times."

"Nay, you have naught with which to reproach yourself, dear," protested Averill. "'Twas only that your reproof reminded me of—of the look in Mr. Burgoyne's eyes when I turned from him without a word. He—he looked like a—like a——"

"Like a dog that has received a blow from a hand it loves," volunteered Sylvia.

"Yes. That was it. And it made me feel very miserable, particularly as——"

"As what?" queried Sylvia, as she paused.

"As he had already written to me, and I had torn up the letter and sent the pieces back to him."

"Averill! How dreadful!" cried Sylvia, in accents of horror. "Whatever made you do such a thing?"

"At the time I thought him presumptuous and insolent in daring to write to me. You see, in the letter he begged me to grant him an interview, and I thought his request an impertinence. But since then I have wondered much if mayhap he had something to tell me that would have thrown a different light on his former conduct, and I have regretted my uncompromising attitude."

"Hum! 'Twas an unwise one to say the least of it," agreed Sylvia. "Have you ever thought that your scorn of him might lead him to do something foolish—something that both you and he might ever afterwards regret?"

"Good gracious, no!" Averill was startled, and sat upright suddenly. "What do you mean?"

Miss Ravenscourt stretched out a languid hand and plucked a sprig of lad's love from a bush which grew within reach. She held it to her pretty nose and sniffed its fragrance several times ere she replied, watching her companion with reflective eyes the while.

"The Meltondene woman was in town all the time I was there," she said slowly, at last. "I saw her twice shortly after I arrived, walking in the Mall with Sir Randolph Gorst. But Sir Randolph, I am told, came north again shortly after that, and the next time I saw her she was with that Mr. Carless whom you pointed out to me when last I was here." She paused, and again sniffed daintily at the lad's love.

"Well? Is that all you have to tell me?" queried Averill impatiently.

"No." Miss Ravenscourt was very deliberate. "Three times after that did I see her, and each time she was in the company of—Mr. Burgoyne."

"Ah!" The lines of Averill's mouth became hard as the tones of her voice. "And what is the inference, pray?"

"The inference is that, if you are not careful, you may drive him into that woman's arms," asserted Sylvia calmly.

"That is a matter of indifference to me," said Averill coldly.

Sylvia smiled sceptically. "Even so, surely it is incumbent upon you to save him from that," she retorted. "Such a marriage could only end in disaster, as you very well know."

"And what would you have me do? Am I to go and offer myself in Lady Meltondene's stead?" enquired Averill satirically.

"You might do worse," said Sylvia drily. "You would, methinks, find happiness awaiting you. However, a milder course will serve. When next you see Mr. Burgoyne, smile upon him. 'Twill do you no harm, but I venture to assert that it will rout the fair Barbara for good and all."

"And if I frown instead?"

"Then doubtless Lady Meltondene will triumph. I promise you she will not hesitate to use every weapon in her armory, and those weapons are by no means few or ineffective, as you know. And methinks you will have to decide the matter at no very distant date. It surprises me that Mr. Burgoyne has not returned, and I'll warrant he will not delay much longer."

"He dare not return. He would be arrested if he showed his face in Bolderburn."

"Pooh! 'twill take more than the fear of arrest to deter him, an I mistake not."

"You forget that he ran away from arrest. Why should he be bolder or more foolhardy now?"

"I don't believe that he ran away," declared Sylvia obstinately. "'Twas something more pressing than fear that influenced his departure."

"But he had vowed that he would not go." The words

were out before Averill could check them, and she crimsoned with chagrin.

"Ah! He vowed so, did he?" Sylvia regarded her friend shrewdly. "To whom did he make that vow, and why?"

"He made it to me, but I cannot tell you why," replied Averill, her face still aflame.

"I see!" Miss Ravenscourt's dark curls nodded vigorously. "Well, he will return, if only to explain why he broke his word. And I'll warrant the explanation will be satisfactory."

"Say rather plausible," said Averill contemptuously. "Your vow-breaker usually hath an excellent excuse for his shortcomings. But he is not generally very convincing. Vows are vows, Sylvia, and they should be kept whatever may befall."

"You are convinced of that?" asked Sylvia slyly.

"Of course."

"Then you would have had him keep all his vow?" pursued Sylvia relentlessly.

Again Averill colored. "What do you know of his vow?" she asked quickly.

"Nothing, madam. I did but use my woman's wit to bring me to the conclusion that it had a tail to it as well as a head. In avoiding my question you very kindly gave me a glimpse of the tail; and I venture the opinion that even if Mr. Burgoyne has broken half the vow he will keep the remainder."

"I doubt it," said Averill, with a superior smile. "He will not be allowed to keep it."

"Who will prevent him?"

"I will," declared Averill emphatically.

Again Sylvia shook her curls, and she smiled. "'Tis evident you have not fully gauged the strength of Mr. Burgoyne's character, dear," she said tolerantly. She rose, and sauntered slowly away towards the water's edge. "Which

only goes to prove the truth of the adage that love is blind," she flung over her shoulder maliciously as she went—a remark which reduced her friend to a condition of speechless rage.

Almost at this very instant Mr. Burgoyne, after a perfunctory attempt at eating which caused his lackey to shake his head despairingly, pushed away his plate and rose from the breakfast-table in his handsome apartment in St. James's. He yawned as he did so, for he had been up late last night, in addition to which he had slept but little. He strolled over to the window which overlooked the street; and as he gazed out idly upon the sunlit world a glad cry suddenly escaped his lips, and turning, he dashed pell-mell out of the room and across the hall to where a footman was opening the door to admit a tall, fashionably-attired gentleman.

"Ned! Upon my soul, I am delighted to see you," cried Stephen, thrusting the footman aside and taking the newcomer's outstretched hand in both of his. "You are welcome indeed! Come into the library; 'tis cool in there. What brings you to London?" he continued, when his visitor was comfortably settled in a big armchair.

"A woman," replied Ned Carless succinctly, with a laugh. "A very charming woman, Burgoyne, but a very difficult one."

"Do I know her?"

"Aye, you know her only too well," he said drily. "I came up to London, for the second time within a month, in the hope of finding Lady Meltondene."

"Indeed!" Stephen looked surprised. "Methinks the last time you were with me you left me for a similar purpose."

"So I did. And on that occasion I found her, too. She was not at her home when I enquired there, so drawing a bow at a venture, I went straight to your room at the Nag's Head."

"'Fore gad! 'twas an audacious thing to do," cried Stephen, aghast. "You took a very grave risk, Ned."

"Yes, 'twas a risk. But I have told you before that the boldest course is often the wisest, and I reasoned that Lady Meltondene had no cause whatever to betray me as she had threatened to betray you. Also, I thought it possible that my advent in person would banish any such inclination that she might have; and events proved me right."

"She was still in my room when you got there, then?"

"She was. And with her were Gorst and Crisp, whilst there were a number of men concealed in and about the premises in readiness for your return."

Stephen whistled. "'Twas a narrow shave for me, methinks," he mused.

"I warrant you'll never have a narrower, Burgoyne. My arrival disconcerted them all; and when I asserted that I intended to await your return, Crisp abruptly ordered me to get out, alleging that they were there on matters of state and could not tolerate outside interference. I saw no object in making a fuss—for I already possessed the information I had sought—and I turned to go, but as I did so I saw Gorst whisper eagerly to Lady Meltondene. With a quick nod of comprehension, she rose, and, calling me, requested my escort as far as her dwelling."

"That was to prevent you from attempting to warn me, I suppose," hazarded Stephen.

"Exactly. And, once we were in the saddle, Lady Meltondene bluntly told me so. She also told me that she knew all about my complicity in the affair, and she hinted that unless I did as she wished she would be compelled to use her knowledge."

"And what did you say?"

Carless rubbed his chin. "I said nothing," he replied.

"And is that all?" asked the disappointed Stephen.

"Not quite." Carless smiled reminiscently. "By this time we had left the village behind us, and there was no-

body in sight. So, instead of saying anything, I seized her round the waist and—kissed her!"

"You kissed her!" echoed Stephen, astounded.

"I kissed her," repeated Carless firmly. "Why not? Was she not made to be kissed? Besides, she is a woman, and with most women a kiss is a thousand times more effective than all the arguments and protestations in the world."

"Hum! Perhaps so," said Stephen dubiously. "And she?"

"Oh she was mighty indignant, of course. In fact, she lashed me across the cheek with her whip, but I only laughed at her. Then she galloped ahead of me down the road in high dudgeon, and I must needs put spurs to my horse to catch her." Carless glanced at Stephen out of the corners of his twinkling eyes. "After hearing which, you will probably not believe me when I tell you that when I helped her to dismount at her door she returned my kiss of her own accord."

"'Fore gad, Ned! you amaze me," marvelled Stephen. Then he smiled; but, before he could speak, Carless turned on him fiercely and said:

"That smile tells me what you are going to say, Burgoyne, and I advise you not to say it. No man speaks lightly of Barbara Meltondene in my presence, remember. For, notwithstanding all that I told you on a former occasion, hope has been born in me that some day I shall call her wife."

"Do you mean to say that she has——"

"No." Carless anticipated him. "She would laugh the idea to scorn were it broached to her. And I can tell you no more, lest you think me a superstitious fool."

"Hum! I understand that she has left town."

"So I am informed," said Carless, rather despondently. "My journey is therefore fruitless, and I am returning forthwith, for I am hoping to find that she has gone north again."

"As I should like to do," sighed Stephen. "When are you going to release me from my parole, Ned?"

"It was for that very purpose I sought you. I have good reason to believe that I am no longer in any danger of arrest as your accomplice, and, so far as I am concerned, you are free to return to Bolderburn when you please. But I must warn you that you will take a very grave risk if you do so. Lancashire is still an unhealthy county for you. Gorst is back again in the district, dancing attendance on Lady Averill Stapleton; and, although I know that Crisp is inclined to let the affair sink into oblivion, Sir Randolph will never let him rest once he knows that you have returned. I should think twice about it if I were you, Burgoyne."

"Once is enough, Ned," cried Stephen gaily. "When do you set out?"

"Tomorrow morning at seven o' the clock."

"Then if you will have me, I will ride with you. 'Twill be a pleasant journey."

"Say rather that it will start pleasantly. It may end in vastly different fashion."

"Well, we must leave that to chance."

"Chance is a sorry jester, remember."

"So she is, Ned, but her jests are not always unkind."

CHAPTER XX

TELLS HOW LADY AVERILL OUTWITTED SIR RANDOLPH GORST

A CORDIAL welcome awaited Stephen when, shortly after parting company with Carless at the point where the roads to Worpleden and Bolderburn diverged, his long ride from London terminated at the Nag's Head Inn. The delight of Tom Hindle and his wife was made manifest not only by the warmth of their greeting, but by the quantity and variety of the choice viands which they set before him when he sat down to table. Even the taciturn Jack showed pleasure at his coming; and after he had groomed and fed Stephen's horse with even more than his customary care, he diffidently entered the room in which the new arrival was manfully attempting to cope with the landlord's prodigality, and actually made a speech of three consecutive sentences—a circumstance which so surprised his father that a bottle of very choice wine slipped from his fingers and shattered itself to dripping fragments on the stone floor.

"Glad to see you again, sir," said Jack, taking a deep breath. "Real glad, I am. Never was gladder to see any man."

"You are all very kind to me," said Stephen, flushing with pleasure. "I am just as glad as you are, Jack. I should have come back long ago had I been permitted."

"Happen you'll be staying a bit longer this time, sir," ventured the landlord diffidently.

"That depends on circumstances, Tom," responded Stephen evasively.

"And on Crisp!" interjected Jack succinctly.

Stephen laughed. "What makes you think that, Jack?" he asked.

"Can see as far through a brick wall as most folk," declared Jack drily.

"I believe you can! Well, you are not far off the mark. My arrival may stir up a hornet's nest, so I have no time to waste. Do you know if Lord Alverford is in the district? He left London before I did, and he should be here by now."

"Saw him yesterday," said Jack.

"Then will you take a note over to his house for me, and bring me back an answer? I want to see him as soon as possible."

Jack shook his head. "Won't be at home, sir," he said confidently.

"Why? He surely hasn't gone away again!" cried Stephen, in dismay.

"No, sir. Still here."

"Then if he be not at home, where is he?"

"Colonel Oldfield's, sir," said Jack solemnly, but with his shrewd eyes a-twinkle.

An answering twinkle appeared in Stephen's eyes. "I quite understand, Jack," he said. "Take the note there, but give it into Lord Alverford's own hands if possible."

The note despatched, Stephen finished his meal and then went to his old room to await Jack Hindle's return. And while he waited he pondered over the difficulties and dangers which beset him.

His immediate concern was not the checkmating of Sir Randolph Gorst's conspiracy against him. Judging by what Carless had told him in London, that would be no easy matter, but he regarded it, for the time being at least, as a secondary consideration. He had come back to Lancashire to win Averill Stapleton's love. To most men similarly situated, the task he had set himself would have seemed so utterly impossible of accomplishment that it would never

have been essayed, but Stephen was not to be deterred by difficulties, however appalling they might appear. As long as Averill remained unbetrothed, he would leave no stone unturned in his efforts to redeem the remnants of his vow; and if, before the High Constable took action, he could persuade her to utter the words which he longed to hear, he thought he saw his way clear to remain free to wed her and at the same time to render his enemies impotent to harm him.

Arrived at this point, he shook his head dolefully. Had ever man before him risked his neck on a chance so slender? The only sign of friendliness, let alone love, that Averill had ever shown him was on that day when he lay a prisoner in her uncle's stables. And she had only been kind to him then because she pitied him. From the moment when she discovered his true identity she had treated him with scorn and contempt; and her attitude towards him during her recent visit to town was uncompromising in the extreme! Yet he recollected that she had once thought fit to warn him, through Sergeant Ball, of the peril which was then imminent, and his drooping spirits revived as he reviewed in his mind the possible motives for her so doing.

But his train of thought was abruptly banished by the precipitate entry of Lord Alverford. The viscount rushed into the room like a boisterous but jovial breeze, and seizing his protesting friend by the shoulders, he whirled him willy-nilly round the room.

"Ya've done it, Steve; 'pon my soul and honor, ya have!" he cried ecstatically. "Burn me and blister me if she hasn't relented!"

"Relented! Who has relented?" asked Stephen eagerly, his pulses leaping to the thrill of sudden hope.

"Why, Averill, of course," replied Harry impatiently. "Whom did ya think I meant? And most confounded gracious she was about it, too, b'gad!"

"Pull yourself together, Harry, and explain things properly," cried Stephen irritably.

"Gad! ya're doocid peevish, Steve," protested Harry. "Jack Hindle brought me ya note, and said he wanted an answer. And, damme, he refused to go until he got one! So, after a futile attempt to get rid of the obstinate fellow, I went out into the garden and found Sylvia."

"That wouldn't take you long, I'll wager," smiled Stephen.

"Well, no, not very," admitted Harry, blushing guiltily. "I showed her ya' note, and straightway she went to where Averill sat and asked her point-blank if she'd receive ya if ya called upon her. Averill looked most confounded embarrassed, and for a moment I thought she was going to refuse; then she smiled, and, turning to me, she said in a voice as sweet as honey 'Ya may bring ya' friend to see me tomorrow afternoon at three.' "

Undisguised delight illumined Stephen's face, and he seized his friend's hand and shook it vigorously. "Gad, Harry! you are an ambassador in a thousand," he cried. "I owe you much for this."

"Nay, pink me and perish me, 'twas Sylvia did it, not I," protested Harry. "She is the cleverest, most remark——"

"Yes, yes, I know." Stephen hurriedly cut him short. "And she deserves all your praise." He eyed his friend quizzically. "Tell me, Harry, why are you so overjoyed that Lady Averill has consented to see me?"

"Well, ya know, ya're my greatest friend, and naturally——" commenced Harry ponderously.

"Naturally you are pleased," finished Stephen for him. "I do not doubt that for a moment, Harry, but it seems a trifling matter to have caused you to behave as deliriously as you did just now. Is it only for my sake that you rejoice?"

The embarrassed viscount blushed again as he turned

petulantly away. " 'Tis most cursed ungrateful in you to ask such a question, b'jove!" he complained indignantly. "But if ya must know, I have some small interest in the matter apart from you. Ya see, I know how ya feel about Averill, and if ya were to step in and win her, my mother couldn't grumble at me any more for not marrying her myself, now could she?"

"Not very well," conceded Stephen solemnly.

"Well, then, she couldn't say anything if I—er—if I married Sylvia instead, could she?" pursued Harry somewhat anxiously.

"I am not so sure of that," replied Stephen dubiously. "But she would doubtless be more likely to view the matter tolerantly."

"That's what I think," said Harry, in gratified tones. "She is bound to take to Sylvia once she knows her properly; that stands to reason, doesn't it, b'jove?"

But Stephen did not commit himself on this moot point. He had grave doubts as to whether Lady Alverford would approve for her son any match which she herself had not made. So he dexterously changed the subject; and at length Harry was obliged to depart with his qualms still unallayed.

On the following day precisely at three o'clock the two friends entered Colonel Oldfield's ivy-clad portals, and to Stephen's surprise and gratification they were met by Sergeant Ball and shown into the garden, where Averill and Miss Ravenscourt sat in the shade of some trees waiting to receive them. There is something delightfully informal about being received in a garden. It suggests an intimacy which is seldom felt within doors; and Stephen thrilled to this unexpected mark of Averill's favor. He also noticed that the Colonel was nowhere to be seen—a fact which made his peculiar position distinctly less uncomfortable.

"You are welcome, Mr. Burgoyne," said Averill graciously, flushing a little as he bent over the hand she held out

to him. "You have already met Miss Ravenscourt, I think. Would you care to drink tea with us? I know that most of you men profess to dislike it intensely, yet I vow that I believe you secretly love it as much as we do."

Gratefully he took the proffered cup and saucer. She had contrived to put him at his ease immediately, and she proceeded to play the hostess with a grace and charm that showed not the faintest trace of embarrassment. From her manner, anyone might have supposed that Stephen was a frequent and welcome guest, and he marvelled exultantly at the contradictions of mood of which her sex is capable.

Presently Sylvia rose from her chair and called Harry's attention to a flower-bed which blazed in blue and crimson glory a few yards away from where they sat. This gave Stephen the opportunity he sought, and without hesitation he seized it.

"Lady Averill, I trust you will not think that I have unwarrantably thrust myself upon you," he said earnestly, leaning towards her and speaking in an undertone. "I have much to say to you, and I humbly beg that you will not refuse to hear me. I tried to find the means of saying it when you were in town, but I was not fortunate."

Averill colored again. "London does not agree with me," she said, with assumed lightness. "It makes my head ache and adversely affects my temper. That must be my excuse for my rudeness to you there, sir."

"I deserved all I got, madam. After all that had happened, I had no right whatever to approach you either in person or by letter. But I——"

He stopped abruptly. Averill's attitude had suddenly become tense, and her eyes, incredulous and cold, were staring past him. Perplexed, he turned his head in the direction of her gaze, and to his amazement he saw Sergeant Ball approaching, followed closely by Lady Meltondene! Sylvia had also observed the approach of the un-

welcome visitor, and with a word to Harry she moved quickly to Averill's side and there stood in rigid hauteur.

But Barbara did not appear to notice the frigid hostility of the circle into which she stepped. Her face was pale as death and her eyes tragic with fear, whilst the hand with which she thrust the Sergeant to one side ere he could announce her to his mistress trembled like an aspen leaf.

"Forgive this intrusion, Averill," she cried tremulously, holding out imploring hands. "I know that I am not welcome here, and Sergeant Ball did everything in his power to prevent my gaining admission to your presence. But I insisted upon seeing you—not for my own sake, but for——"

She faltered, and pressed her bosom with both hands as though to still its tempestuous heaving. She glanced appealingly from one to another of the four faces around her, but, although she saw compassion in Harry's and discomfort in Stephen's, those of the two women were cold and hard as marble.

"Yes? For what, madam?" Averill reminded her, in clear, incisive tones.

"Because—because I bring news—imperative news!" she replied desperately. "The High Constable is, at this very moment, on his way here with a dozen or more men to arrest Mr. Burgoyne!"

If Barbara had intended to spread confusion and dismay around her, she certainly succeeded. Averill jumped to her feet in alarm, Sylvia caught her breath and gazed at her with eyes of dread, whilst Alverford involuntarily sprang in front of Stephen as if to hide him from the view of those who came to seek him.

Of them all, Stephen was the one who seemed least disturbed by the dramatic announcement. Not a movement did he make; but a grim little smile played about his mouth, and his keen eyes scanned Lady Meltondene's face until she

quailed beneath their gaze. Suddenly he turned to Averill, but before he could speak she held up an imperious hand.

"Mr. Crisp would never dare to violate my uncle's privacy so," she cried. "You have surely been misinformed, madam. Know you not that Colonel Oldfield is a justice of the peace?"

"I neither know nor care what he is!" Barbara shook her head despairingly. "But I know that unless Mr. Burgoyne leaves here immediately nothing can save him. 'Tis no time for——"

She broke off suddenly. The sound of voices raised in altercation had become plainly audible; and Stephen, glancing sharply round him, caught sight of two or three figures lurking in distant parts of the garden.

"She has told the truth, Harry," he whispered in his friend's ear. "See yonder; we are surrounded. Crisp is taking no chances this time, and I fear me that the game is up."

It was now possible to distinguish between the raised voices of those who were evidently approaching from the direction of the house by a path which was concealed by a high privet hedge. Colonel Oldfield's words came clear and distinct. He was angrily disputing the passage of others, but it was obvious that his efforts were of no avail, for the sounds came steadily nearer.

"By Jupiter! but you shall smart for this, sir!" cried the Colonel, in an extremity of wrath. "You shall discover whether or no you can force your way into a man's house with impunity, you damn pirate! Don't forget that I am a justice, and I'll have you hounded from office if I spend the remainder of my life at the task."

"Come, come, Colonel; Mr. Crisp's duty is unpleasant, but what choice has he?" came in soothing accents from someone else.

"Who the devil asked for your opinion, Gorst?" roared

the Colonel. "Might I enquire what you are doing here, anyway?"

"I came to call on Lady Averill. My visit chanced to coincide with Crisp's, that is all," replied Sir Randolph smoothly.

"What a tale!" snorted the Colonel. "D'ye expect me to believe——"

But at this moment the oncoming party came into view of those who waited, and the High Constable, disconcerted by their numbers, hesitated. But Kellett, his lieutenant, who with another of his men walked just behind him, urged him on, and he had no choice but to go forward, which he did with as much dignity as he could command.

"Your pardon, ladies," he said, sweeping off his hat with a flourish and bowing low. "I have a painful duty to perform."

He gave a signal to his men, who ran forward and each laid a hand on Stephen's shoulders. Then he turned to his prisoner and said pompously:

"Stephen Burgoyne, I arrest you in the name of the King for attempted abduction and highway robbery committed within the hundred of——"

"That's all right, Mr. Crisp," Stephen interrupted him quietly. "A speech is quite unnecessary. I am ready to go with you."

"Hum! Ha! You understand that——"

"I understand everything. And I beg of you to carry out your duty with what despatch you may."

"Very good. If you will give me your word not to attempt to escape, we can depart at once," said Mr. Crisp, surprised and gratified by the other's docile acquiescence.

"You have it," said Stephen promptly.

"Take care, Crisp!" interposed Sir Randolph warningly. "Remember what happened last time."

Before Mr. Crisp could reply Averill turned on Gorst

like a fury. "What concern is this of yours, may I ask, Sir Randolph?" she cried imperatively.

"None whatever, madam," he replied deprecatingly. "I merely thought it well to remind Mr. Crisp that he is dealing with a slippery customer."

"And have you no other interest in the matter?" she asked sharply.

"None at all. What interest could I have beyond that of a law-abiding citizen?" he returned unctuously.

"You swear to that?"

"I do, madam."

"So!" Her eyes flashed dangerously, and she turned quickly to the High Constable, who was already moving away. "One moment, Mr. Crisp. Tell me; who laid this charge against Mr. Burgoyne?"

"No charge was necessary, your ladyship," explained Mr. Crisp, fawning obsequiously. "I was present myself when the prisoner held up your carriage."

"You were lying in ambush expecting the crime to be committed, were you not?"

"Yes, your ladyship."

"And who gave you the information which induced you to act?"

"I—I cannot answer that question for you, madam," he replied, decidedly uneasy under this swift and unexpected cross-examination.

"Then answer it for me!" commanded Colonel Oldfield sternly. "I speak as a justice of the peace, Crisp. Who gave you the information?"

The High Constable was in a dilemma. He had to choose between one who was his patron and another whose influence in the county he feared exceedingly. But he did not hesitate long. Whatever happened now, he could expect no further favors from Gorst, whilst Colonel Oldfield had the power to strengthen materially his distinctly precarious hold upon his lucrative office. So, as self-interest

was the most potent argument that Mr. Crisp knew, he answered:

"Sir Randolph Gorst."

"Ah!" The Colonel's expression was grim, and he breathed heavily. "Proceed, Averill," he said.

" 'Tis as I thought," she commented, with a disdainful shrug of her shoulders. She paused and looked slowly round the assembled company; then she fixed calm, steady eyes on the High Constable. "You have been misled, Mr. Crisp," she said deliberately. "Mr. Burgoyne is innocent of any offence against the law."

Mr. Crisp smiled incredulously. "But, your ladyship, I saw this with my own——" he began.

She stopped him with a gesture. "I repeat that you were misled, sir," she said emphatically. "The thing which naturally appeared to you to be a crime was simply a frolic —a frolic instigated by me!"

"By you!" The ejaculation came from the Colonel as well as from Mr. Crisp.

"By me," she repeated firmly. She took a quick step forward towards the Colonel, and gazed at him with appealing eyes. "You will forgive me, uncle, I know," she said pleadingly. " 'Twas my foolish whim to play a prank on you, and to that end I called Lord Alverford to my aid. He was reluctant, but I bade him waylay us on our return from Warley Dale, hold up the carriage, and carry me off to the Gables."

"But why, i' gad's name, did you do that?" asked the astounded Colonel.

"To punish you, sir," she said pertly. " 'Tis long ago, uncle, and you will have forgotten, but you had been very rude to me over a certain matter, and I was determined to cry you quits. And this was my method of doing it. Harry asked my permission to enlist the services of two of his friends, of whom Mr. Burgoyne—at that time a stranger

to me—was one. This I granted, never dreaming what dire consequences my folly might have."

"And why did you not tell us this months ago?"

"Because my courage failed me; and afterwards when the captives had escaped, it seemed to me that confession was unnecessary."

The High Constable was plainly nonplussed. The situation was entirely outside his somewhat limited experience. If Lady Averill spoke the truth—and he would never have dared to doubt her—then it was plain that did he arrest Burgoyne he had no alternative but to arrest Lord Alverford as well—a thing unthinkable! To arraign the viscount—notorious for his wealth, his indolence, and his vapidity—for highway robbery would be to make himself the laughing-stock of the county and to bring down the wrath of his masters, the justices of the peace, upon his head! Yet if he abandoned the object of his errand his dignity must suffer, and he would look foolish in the eyes of his subordinates.

His indecision did not pass unnoticed. Gorst, who saw all his carefully-laid plans being rendered futile, was watching him narrowly, and the baronet had no intention of allowing him to abandon his task on the bare testimony of one woman. So, in the careless tones of one who is merely an interested spectator, he remarked:

"Your surprising announcement places our friend Mr. Crisp in a delicate and difficult position, Lady Averill. He cannot doubt your word, of course, but at the same time you must remember that, as an officer of the law, he must perforce view the matter from a different standpoint from yours. In his eyes the act you call a frolic was a felony, and he is in duty bound to treat it as such until the evidence has been sifted."

Averill's lips curled. "You mean that he cannot accept my unsupported word," she said contemptuously. "Very

well. Lord Alverford can corroborate what I say. Ask him."

If Gorst expected Harry to show any trace of confusion in being thus called upon he was disappointed. The viscount had the moral support of Miss Sylvia Ravenscourt—a circumstance which would have emboldened him to flout the cleverest lawyer in the land.

"'Tis doocid discourteous in ya to attempt to discredit Lady Averill, Gorst," he chided the baronet serenely. "If Crisp wants corroboration, I'll give it him, b'jove! But it seems to me that there's no necessity."

"I agree, your lordship," said Mr. Crisp deferentially. "If your lordship and Lady Averill both say that it was a jest, there the matter ends."

"Well, we do," declared Harry, in complacent tones. "'Twas a jest and nothing more."

"Very good, your lordship." Mr. Crisp bowed. "I will——"

"Wait!"

The command came from Sir Randolph, and it was so imperative that the High Constable paused. Gorst had been thinking rapidly. He knew—or thought he knew—that Averill was lying, and he imagined that he possessed the means whereby he might yet save his plans from shipwreck.

"Before you depart, Crisp, I think you ought to clear up this matter completely," he said suavely. "'Twould secure Mr. Burgoyne against any possibility of further unpleasantness. For instance, there was a third man mentioned as being a party to the affair, but his name was not given. Would it not be as well to know it?"

"Perhaps it would," admitted Mr. Crisp grudgingly, none too pleased that Gorst had thought fit to remind him of his duty.

Here Barbara Meltondene plucked Sir Randolph's sleeve sharply. "Have a care!" she whispered urgently. "You are on dangerous ground."

But before he could reply Averill had turned to him again. "Do you really wish me to divulge the third man's name, Sir Randolph?" she asked, her eyes flashing ominously.

Gorst shrugged his shoulders. "His name means naught to me, madam," he disclaimed. "I spoke for Mr. Burgoyne's sake."

"Your altruism becomes you, sir!" she said scathingly. "Doubtless Mr. Burgoyne is duly grateful. So, as you desire Mr. Crisp to hear the name of Lord Alverford's other accomplice, hear it he shall. His name is—Sir Randolph Gorst!"

This was the very last thing that Gorst had expected. Obsessed by his schemes, it had not occurred to him that Averill might be in full possession of the true facts regarding the waylaying of Colonel Oldfield's carriage, and even had it done so, he would have dismissed the idea as impossible. For, like many another clever schemer before him, he had failed to gauge correctly the workings of a woman's mind. On that day when, after his disastrous encounter with Stephen, he had awakened to consciousness to find Averill ministering to him, his instinctive suspicion that she might have overheard the conversation which preceded the conflict was promptly and completely banished from his mind. Her solicitous manner, and her apparently artless remarks and questions, had led him to conclude that she had found him after Stephen had left him; and neither by word nor look did she hint of her knowledge of his duplicity. Even now, when that knowledge was revealed to him in a manner so disconcerting, he could not conceive how she had come by it, and he was more than half inclined to regard it as guesswork.

Not for an instant did he lose his self-possession. He smiled indulgently at Averill, and said quietly: "Preposterous, madam! Have you forgotten that the third man was taken prisoner along with Mr. Burgoyne, whilst I, solely for the sake of the adventure, was with Crisp's party?"

"I have forgotten nothing!" she declared vehemently. "I have not forgotten that you hailed Lord Alverford's proposal with enthusiasm, and agreed to join him. Nor have I forgotten that you hired another to take your place, nor that you made haste to betray both your friends and your deputy to the High Constable. To serve your own base purposes you deliberately tried to turn innocent comedy into grim tragedy; and you may rest assured that I shall never forget that as long as I live!"

Quivering with angry mortification though he was, Gorst's effrontery was still such that he would have made an attempt to justify himself had not Colonel Oldfield intervened.

"This has gone far enough," said the latter sternly. "Are you satisfied, Crisp?"

"Perfectly, sir, perfectly," said Crisp effusively.

"May Mr. Burgoyne take it that he will be entirely free from further molestation?"

"Certainly he may. I apologize most humbly to him for such trouble and inconvenience as I may have caused him, but I beg him to remember that I acted in good faith. I was grossly deceived by Sir Randolph Gorst, very grossly deceived; and I am scarcely to blame for what has happened." He bowed ceremoniously to the company at large. "Permit me to bid you good day, ladies and gentlemen all. And as for you, Sir Randolph, let me warn you against further attempts to make the law serve your own ends. The next time you may burn your fingers."

He waved a pompous hand to his men, and made a dignified exit which, in the circumstances, did him infinite credit.

Promptly the Colonel turned to Gorst. "You'll oblige me by following in the wake of your ally, sir," he said curtly.

"But, Colonel, I——"

"Enough, sir!" The Colonel's tones were peremptory, and brooked no argument. "Your presence is an affront to everyone here. Begone!"

"And please take your friend Lady Meltondene with you, sir," chimed in Averill sweetly. "See, her disappointment has so wrought on her that she is pale as death, and I fear she will swoon unless you give her your arm."

Wrath blazed in Barbara's eyes and cheeks. "Do you make a practice of insulting your guests, madam?" she cried.

"No, madam," replied Averill, in honeyed accents. "My guests are invariably treated with courtesy. But perhaps you will recollect that you came here uninvited and unwelcomed. Your ruse to be present at Mr. Burgoyne's arrest was clever, and I congratulate you on it. I admit that you deceived me, but not for long. Your acting was magnificent at first; but later, when you thought yourself unobserved, you forgot your part. Good day to you, madam!"

CHAPTER XXI

TELLS OF GRIM HAPPENINGS IN GREYPOOL WOOD

IT was very evident that Stephen's mood was not in keeping with the day. Never was morning more perfect or countryside more beautiful. The sauciest little breeze that ever caressed maiden's cheek, laughed roguishly at the tall stateliness of the golden, poppy-sprinkled corn, and made it bow spasmodically to her capricious will. Invisible larks, tempted by the radiant loveliness of dying summer to raise themselves on tiny wings to incredibly dizzy heights, sent their faint, sweet notes of joyous melody from out the azure sky to enchant the ear of wingless man. Handsome cattle, sleek with luscious pasture, dappled the green of the trim-hedged fields with brown and white and black, or stood reflected in the calm waters of the limpid ponds from which they drank. A heavy young colt, with thews and sinews that bespoke the strength and vigor of the race of shire-horses from which he sprang, stopped his mad scampers round a roomy paddock to gaze contemplatively over the white-barred gate at Stephen, as though mutely inviting him to join his youthful frolic.

But Stephen was blind and deaf to everything around him. His brow was puckered in gloomy thought, and his unseeing eyes were fixed upon the dust which his sauntering feet kicked up as he walked aimlessly along the highway. He was utterly unconscious of the direction he took; and although he returned the cheery greetings of such wayfarers as passed him, he did it as mechanically as he swung the cane which he carried.

Coming at length abreast the stile which gave entrance to the leafy depths of Greypool Wood, he paused. The rays of the mounting sun were growing more powerful, and Stephen's shoes were already thick with dust, whereas the wood offered him a cool, clean sanctuary in which he might indulge his reverie to the uttermost, undisturbed by lumbering cart or jovial horseman.

After a moment's hesitation he climbed the stile and set off along the faintly marked pathway. He crossed the glade which, despite his preoccupation, brought back to him vivid recollections of his primitive encounter with Sir Randolph Gorst; but a minute or two later he was sitting near the pool, wrapped once again in thoughtful gloom.

The knowledge that he was again free to go where he willed, that he need no longer fear the long arm of the law, had long since ceased to give him pleasure. The incredulous joy which had surged through him when he heard Averill lie unblushingly in his defence had been short-lived; within half an hour of her having put Crisp to rout she had given him gently, but very plainly, to understand that her action was due, not to her liking for him, but to her antipathy to Barbara Meltondene and Gorst. It was her whim to worst those who conspired against him—just that, and nothing more.

It never occurred to Stephen to question this trite explanation of her motives. Like most men of his type in their dealings with women, he was inclined to accept things at their face value; the intricate twistings and turnings of the feminine mind were outside his ken. Hence Averill's cold, precise remarks had dealt a shattering blow at the newborn hope which had quickened the beat of his heart and brightened the light of his eyes; and dark despair accompanied him when he left her dwelling.

Yet his innate stubbornness had forbidden him to accept defeat without further question. Thrice had he called at Oldfield Grange since that eventful day, and thrice had

she received him with a formal courtesy that forbade him to advance any claim to intimacy with her. True, Colonel Oldfield had on each occasion welcomed him with bluff cordiality and invited him to repeat his visit, but neither cordiality nor invitation had been seconded by Averill. Her manner had been coldly aloof, leaving him no option but to believe that she preferred his room to his company.

Nevertheless, he still lingered in Bolderburn, although, apart from a chance remark of Sylvia Ravenscourt's which may have influenced him, it is probable that he could not have advanced any adequate reason for so doing. But from the way in which that remark of Sylvia's had been uttered it had seemed to him to possess some significance—a significance which was not very apparent, however. He was leaving Oldfield Grange after his third rebuff when Sylvia entered the gates alone and on horseback. He would have passed her by with nothing more than a formal salutation, but she stopped him with a gesture and reined in her horse.

"Fie, Mr. Burgoyne!" she cried reprovingly. "Do you still bear me ill-will for what I said to you that day at the inn?"

"No, no, madam," he protested, in some confusion.

"Then why do you attempt to pass me without either a word or a smile? I thought that by now we had become friends."

"Indeed, Miss Ravenscourt, 'tis as a friend that I regard you, and with good reason," he said, with obvious sincerity.

"Then tell me why you are so distrait and look so unhappy. Does Averill still prove unkind?" she asked slyly.

"I am beginning to think that she hates me," he replied wearily.

"Hate is preferable to indifference, sir," she reminded him. "'Tis, like pity, near akin to love. And remember that despair never yet helped any man to win a woman who was worth the winning."

She had smiled meaningly as she left him to ponder her

cryptic utterance, and somehow that smile had lifted a little of the cloud that damped his spirits. But now it had descended again—heavier and more depressing than ever; and as he sat there beside the pool, the conviction that his love for Averill was entirely hopeless grew upon him until it became a certainty. This fantastic adventure of his had come to a sorry finish; and there was nothing left for him to do but to return to town and its pleasures, and to seek in them the antidote for his misery.

With a sigh he rose to his feet, and at that very moment Averill herself appeared in the path. She was clad in a filmy gown of pale green, and carried a basket on her arm; and, as she came slowly towards him, Stephen thought that he had never before looked upon a woman whose appearance was so perfectly in keeping with the sylvan beauty of her surroundings.

Her gaze was fixed pensively on the ground, and for a moment or two she did not see him standing there motionless; but when she lifted her eyes and caught sight of him a bright crimson flood mantled her cheeks, and she frowned slightly, as though annoyed that she had found him here. But her footsteps never faltered. She came straight on, and stopped opposite to him as she gave him good day.

"This is the second time we have met in Greypool Wood, Mr. Burgoyne," she said. "You remember the first, perhaps."

"I devoutly wish that I could forget it, madam," he said earnestly.

"And so do I. 'Tis no pleasant memory."

"Much would I give to banish it completely from your mind, but that is scarce possible. Yet I fain would try to dull its recollection by making our present meeting more agreeably memorable."

"And how will you accomplish that, pray?" she flashed at him.

"Nay, madam, I know not," he said lamely. "But if you will linger here awhile with me I might——"

"Impossible, sir," she interposed, with finality. "I go upon an errand and have little time to waste."

"Then may I accompany you?" he pleaded. "Your basket looks heavily laden, and I could relieve you of its burden."

She hesitated; then she smiled roguishly. "Think you that your carrying of my basket is like to make our meeting memorable?" she asked archly. "Other men have carried baskets for me, sir, but who they were or when they did it I cannot recall. Still, the basket is heavy, as you surmise, for among other things it contains a pot of honey, another of cream, and two pounds of fresh butter, and I have nigh a mile to go. So I think you may carry it part of the way."

With pulses quickening to her unexpected graciousness, Stephen took the basket from her and fell into step beside her.

"You go to visit the sick?" he hazarded conversationally.

"No. An aged aunt of Sergeant Ball's lives——"

The sentence was never finished, for a large, dirty hand closed over her mouth, and she was held in a stifling, remorseless grip. She could not scream, nor could she move her arms, but she struggled violently, though fruitlessly, to free herself. At the same instant a heavy blow from a club felled Stephen to the ground. He lay there half stunned, partially conscious of what was going on around him but unable to make any effort to rise. He dimly heard a sharp command, and felt somebody seize his coat-collar and roughly peel the coat and waistcoat from his back; then strong arms held him whilst a gag was thrust into his mouth and his arms and legs were pinioned.

When full consciousness returned to him he found himself staring up at four of the most ill-favored ruffians he had ever seen. Their evil, leering eyes were gazing at him sardonically, and as he shifted his glance he was horrified to

see Averill, also bound and gagged, sitting with her back against a tree. By her side stood Sir Randolph Gorst, a triumphant smile on his face and an ugly light in his eyes.

A stifled groan escaped Stephen. Immediately Gorst stepped forward, and without warning he savagely kicked the prostrate man in the side with all his force. Thrice did his foot swing back and forth without pause; then one of the ruffians, hearing a faint but significant crack and noting the ghastly pallow of Stephen's pain-drawn face, touched Gorst on the shoulder.

"Steady, guvnor," he said warningly. "He's had enough for a bit."

"Enough!" cried Gorst. "He'll have had more than enough by the time I've finished with him." He paused, and gazed from one to the other of his prisoners. "'Tis a sweeter revenge than I ever dreamed of," he said gloatingly, with a malignant smile. "We set out to hunt the buck, and we capture the doe as well. I had not expected to get you for a day or two yet, madam, but I seize my opportunities when they come. This merely hastens matters, that is all. And now, madam, you shall have ocular demonstration of how Randolph Gorst pays his debts."

Averill watched him with fearful, fascinated eyes as he stooped down and picked up a whip that had lain unnoticed on the ground. To her horror, she noted that instead of one lash the whip had about half a dozen, bunched together in the manner of a cat-o'nine-tails. She saw Stephen dragged forward and tied up to a dying and almost leafless tree, which stood isolated in the middle of a clearing, with his arms encircling the trunk; and she shuddered, for there was no mistaking Gorst's brutal intent.

"Now, Buck Burgoyne, listen to me," he said in silken tones, when his hired accomplices had completed their task to his liking. "'Tis fitting that the beautiful eyes that once watched you whip me should witness the retribution that is about to befall you. For days have I sought, with-

out success, to entrap you; but I am a patient man, and I bide my time. And now my time has come, and it brings me all that I could possibly have desired." He drew the thongs of his whip caressingly through his fingers. "Here we are free from any possibility of interruption; and I thank the gods for leading you once too often into this charming wood."

He paused, and took from his pocket a small penknife. With this he carefully cut away the shirt from Stephen's back and arms, so that it hung in ribbons from his waist, leaving his muscular shoulders bare and white in the sunlight.

"Now, methinks, we are quite ready, Buck Burgoyne. But before I commence my very pleasant task, let me tell you a secret. Soon you will be in no condition to listen to secrets, and I would not have you miss this one for the world. When next you see Lady Averill Stapleton she will be either a wife or a plaything. Which, depends upon herself. When you recover consciousness she will be far away from here, bound for either Gretna or hell. If she be reasonable 'twill be the former; if not, the latter. Ah! that makes you squirm, eh? And it makes my lady shudder. But, believe me, sir, ere long my lady will thrill instead of shudder; 'tis always so with the women to whom I make love. One more word. Let me warn you that pursuit will be futile. Several hours must pass before my lady is missed from her home, and by midnight tonight 'twill be too late for anyone but me to save her honor. I trust my meaning is clear, sir."

He laughed, and, stepping back a space, measured his distance with his eye. No further word did he speak, but, raising the hand which held the whip, he struck at Stephen with all the savagery of which he was capable.

The very first blow raised angry red weals on Stephen's unprotected flesh; at the second, little spurts of blood appeared and ran down his back. Averill could no longer

endure the spectacle. With an effort she flung herself prone and buried her face in the grass, but she was unable to close her ears to the dreadful, stifled groans which were wrung from the tortured man.

Gorst's lust for revenge seemed insatiable. Tirelessly his arm rose and fell, and fiendish chuckles broke from his lips. Stephen had long since lost consciousness, and his back was a mass of bloody pulp, when the man who had previously interfered ran forward and, with an oath, snatched the whip from Sir Randolph's grasp. Gorst turned upon him with a snarl of rage, but he was a burly rogue, with the bearing and face of the professional pugilist, and the baronet knew better than to strike him.

"Damn you!" he cried. "Give me that whip!"

"Not I!" returned the man insolently. "What's the sense o' thrashing an unconscious man? Let him be. It'll be weeks before he recovers from what he's had, and he'll bear some o' them marks till his dying day."

"Serve him right too, damn him!" said Gorst vindictively. "Go you to the road, and whistle twice the moment Jim gets back with the carriage. I don't want to be seen waiting near this wood."

The man departed on his errand, taking the whip with him, and Gorst walked to where Averill lay sobbing in the grass.

"Cease your crying, girl," he ordered roughly. "Tears will not avail you. As for your lover, he'll be fit for nothing for many a long day, so you have naught to hope for from him. If that fool hadn't interfered I'd have maimed him for life."

Summoning her pride to her aid, Averill sat up, but promptly she regretted it, for her eyes fell upon Stephen's shockingly lacerated back. The pitiless rays of the now hot sun struck full upon it, and already flies were settling on his wounds. She thought of the hours of torture that must be his ere succor came to him; the wood was little

frequented, and his only hope lay in some farm laborer who might use its path as a short cut from field to road. Had her mouth been free of its gag, she would have pleaded desperately for his release, offered well-nigh everything she possessed that he might be saved from the misery that he must endure after he regained consciousness. For, seeing him thus hurt and helpless, she realized that what Sylvia Ravenscourt had said to her that day in the garden was only too true. She loved him, loved him as she had never thought to love any man; but the revelation came too late to be of service to either of them.

Watching her intently, Gorst understood much of what was passing through her mind.

"There, madam; I think we have now done all we can for your lover," he announced, with a hateful chuckle. "A month hence you will laugh with me over the recollection of this little affair. 'Tis a pity that there is not an ant-heap near at hand over which we could tie him down; 'twould be a joy to the little creatures to wander undisturbed over such an attractive mortal." Even the baronet's cut-throat hirelings were inclined to show disapproval of this latest act of wanton cruelty, and he who had seized the whip remarked to another in an undertone:

"He's a fiend incarnate. God help that poor lass! I've half a mind to wash my hands of the business here and now."

"Don't be a fool!" growled his friend. "What's it got to do wi' the likes of us how th' quality settle their differences? Besides, it'll be time enough to quit when we've got paid for th' job."

At that moment a shrill whistle twice repeated fell upon their ears, and at a word from their leader the men made ready to depart.

"Two of you pick this lady up and carry her gently," commanded Sir Randolph. "If she struggles tell me, and I'll deal with her. Matt, you go on ahead and see that

the coast is clear. Nobody must see us put her into the carriage."

He turned to Averill as the two men lifted her by her shoulders and ankles. His threat to deal with her had had the desired effect, for she was quiescent in their grasp and made no attempt at resistance.

"Take a last look at your lover, madam," he counselled her mockingly. "'Tis the last time you will ever see him, methinks. A sight for the gods, isn't he?"

Laughing again, he signalled to his men to go forward, and the party moved away down the path, leaving behind them a pitiable wreck of a man who was slowly beginning to awake to the soul-searing pain of his fly-covered wounds.

CHAPTER XXII

WHEREIN JERRY DODD EXPERIENCES AN EVENTFUL EVENING

JEREMIAH DODD whistled gaily as he walked. The still, pearly dusk of a warm summer's evening always seemed to him to have a marked effect upon his spirits, and never had he known an evening lovelier than this one. Furthermore, he had good reason to be happy, for he had sold more pills, liniment, ointment, and medicine—to say nothing of love potions—at Ingleton Fair than he had ever done before, and in such weather the forthcoming fair at Bolderburn, which opened tomorrow, was bound to bring him much profit.

He shifted his pack to his other shoulder as he left the field path and climbed the stile which gave access to the wood. Soon he would reach the highroad, and then a very few minutes more would see him in the Nag's Head kitchen, enjoying the repast for which his stomach was beginning to clamor. Tom Hindle's ale would be mighty pleasant in the drinking after such a hot day; it had not its peer in all Lancashire.

A peculiar sound put an end to Jerry's anticipations of the good fare to come, and he stopped dead in his tracks and listened intently. However, the sound was not repeated, and after a moment or two he continued on his way. But he had scarce taken half a dozen paces when he stopped again with an exclamation of horror, and stood staring incredulously at the form of a bloody, half-naked man whose apparently lifeless body was bound in an upright position to the trunk of a tree.

"My God! It's Mr. Burgoyne!"

Swiftly he ran to Stephen's side, and, dropping his pack, took a knife from his pocket and severed the cords which bound him. Released, Stephen toppled in a heap to the ground, and immediately Jerry dropped on one knee beside him, carefully removed the gag from his swollen mouth, and, stooping, listened for the beat of his heart. With a grunt of relief he began to chafe the unconscious man's hands to bring back the circulation which had been impeded by the cruel cords which had bound his wrists.

After working thus for some little time, he espied the jar which contained the honey, and picking it up, he ran to the pool, washed it out, and brought it back brimming with clear, cold water. Placing the jar carefully on the ground, he stood a moment in indecision as to what to do next; then he opened his pack and took therefrom several of the linen bandages which were part of his stock-in-trade.

"Better clean him up a bit before I try to bring him back to his senses," he murmured compassionately. "'Twill make it a trifle easier for him."

Very carefully he turned Stephen over on to his face, and immediately curses long and deep broke from Jerry's lips.

"May heaven requite those responsible for such devilry!" he snarled, through clenched teeth. "I'll requite 'em myself if ever I lay hands on 'em."

Working with the gentle tenderness of a woman, and with a skill which the practice of his trade had given him, he cleaned the clotted, fly-blown weals on Stephen's back, shoulders, and arms. This necessitated several journeys to the pool, but at length his task was completed to his satisfaction; so, after smearing the wounds all over with an ointment which he took from his pack, he contrived, with no little difficulty, to bandage his patient completely from neck to waist. This done, he laid him on his back, and, holding up his head, bathed the pallid face and contrived

to pour some raw spirit down the parched throat. At last his efforts were rewarded, and Stephen opened pain-filled eyes to gaze into the compassionate face above him.

"Water," he moaned thickly. "Water."

Jerry had anticipated the request, and picking up the jar, he held it to his patient's swollen lips. Stephen drank eagerly, but it was no easy matter for him to swallow.

"Take it easy, Mr. Burgoyne," counselled Jerry softly. "There's plenty of time."

The word "time" seemed to startle Stephen. He thrust the jar aside, and stared round him wildly. Then words, rendered almost incoherent by the state of his mouth, began to pour from his lips.

"They've taken her away, Jerry," he mumbled brokenly. "There is not a moment to lose. We must go after her now, immediately. Get horses; quick! We must ride like the devil, or God knows what that fiend Gorst will do to her. Get horses, I say. And find Ned. Tell him to follow us——"

"Come, come, Mr. Burgoyne, you must be calm," interposed Jerry soothingly. "Let me get you to the inn, and you can tell your story there."

"Damn you! Do as I tell you!" Stephen's voice was growing stronger, and his eyes glared with anger. "He is taking her to Gretna. He will make her life a hell. Get you gone for the horses."

Realizing that the best course was to humor him, Jerry, by dint of promises and skilful questions, contrived to worm the whole pitiful story in broken sentences from the half-delirious man. Jerry's former military service had taught him the value of prompt action and inured him to tales of horror, and he wasted no time in expressions of sympathy. No sooner was he in full possession of the facts than his quick brain had come to a decision as to the best course to pursue.

"Leave it to me, Mr. Burgoyne," he said. "First I

must get you to the inn; that is imperative. Then I'll send Jack Hindle to find Ned whilst I go and tell Colonel Oldfield what has happened. I——"

"Come on, then," interrupted Stephen impatiently. "You can tell me your plans as we go. Help me to rise."

Jerry opened his eyes wide and shook his head. "You can't possibly walk, Mr. Burgoyne," he said. "I shall have to carry you on my shoulders to the road, and——"

"Walk, you fool! Of course I can walk," cried Stephen irritably. "Help me, I say."

Shaking his head the while, Jerry very tenderly took him by the forearms and got him to his feet. He groaned with pain as he stood upright, and the sweat showed in beads on his forehead as Jerry helped him into his coat; but to the ex-trooper's amazement he did not fall, but, with an effort that must have cost him untold agony, he began to stride in drunken fashion towards the road. The quack doctor marvelled as, giving his patient all the help he could, they staggered together down the path. Never before had he seen dominant will triumph over ailing body in such a manner, and the pace they made surprised him still further.

By great good fortune, just as they reached the road a wain piled high with hay was passing in the direction of Bolderburn. Jerry hailed the wagoner, a good-tempered, bucolic individual, and together they lifted Stephen on to the soft, fragrant pile. A few words sufficed to satisfy the wagoner's curiosity, and very soon the cart stopped outside the Nag's Head Inn.

Jerry assisted Stephen to alight, and started to lead him into the inn. But Stephen thrust him aside and sank down on a bench outside the door.

"Go and find Jack, and send him for Ned," he said curtly. "Then get my horse and one for yourself. I'll wait here."

"But, Mr. Burgoyne, you can't possibly ride a horse!" protested Jerry, aghast. "I'll do all that is necessary. Get

you to bed, and leave things to me. Ned and I will have Lady Averill back safe and sound by the time you wake."

"Go to the devil!" retorted Stephen rudely. "Get me my horse, and cease prating of what you will do."

Inwardly marvelling at his stamina, Jerry wasted no further words, but ran into the stable yard. He was quite convinced that Stephen could not stay in the saddle for two minutes, but he recognized that nothing short of the experiment would satisfy him.

Jerry's interview with Jack Hindle was brief and to the point, and within five minutes the quick rattle of hoofs told Stephen, sitting in a half-fainting condition with his head lolling on his chest, that he was away on his errand. Then Jerry appeared leading two horses, and, with a curt word of reprimand to the little group of idlers who were gazing curiously at Stephen, he said:

"The horses are here, Mr. Burgoyne."

With an effort, Stephen rose to his feet, and, walking forward, essayed to lift foot to stirrup. But the task was beyond his powers. But for Jerry he would have fallen, yet when the ex-trooper once more begged him to abandon his determination he was roundly cursed for his pains. So, with the assistance of one of the bystanders, he literally lifted Stephen into the saddle, and then stood expecting him to tumble out of it again.

"Well, what are you waiting for?" snapped the swaying Stephen. "To horse, man! Every second is of value, I tell you."

And, so saying, he gave to his mount the knee pressure for which it waited, and set off down the road at a pace which caused beads of agony to trickle down his ashen face. Resigning himself to the inevitable, Jerry followed hard in his wake, and before very long they were riding knee to knee—Stephen rocking like a sapling in a gale, and his companion watchful and alert for the headlong tumble which he momentarily expected.

"You are making for Oldfield Grange, I presume, Mr. Burgoyne," hazarded Jerry at length.

Stephen looked at him stupidly, as if he did not understand the remark; then he pulled himself together with an effort.

"Must see Colonel Oldfield before we set off in pursuit," he said dully.

"I doubt if we shall find him at home," said Jerry, shaking his head dubiously. "He must have missed her ladyship long ago. However, it's not far to the Grange, and it will certainly be better to act in concert with him."

The other vouchsafing no reply, they rode on in silence. It was not very long before they came to the large gates which gave entrance to the Colonel's grounds, but had it not been for Jerry, Stephen would have ridden past them. Darkness was falling, but it was not the darkness which was responsible for his failure to notice them. He was well-nigh blind with his sufferings, and it was only his extraordinary will-power that prevented him from slipping unconscious to the ground.

The gates stood wide open and the lodge-keeper's cottage was in darkness, so, stretching out a gentle hand, Jerry grasped Stephen's reins and turned the two horses into the drive. He was relieved to notice that lights gleamed everywhere in the house which they approached, and at the very moment that their horses came to a standstill Colonel Oldfield himself, hatted, booted, and spurred, ran down the broad steps that led from the main entrance doors.

"You bring news, gentlemen?" he cried excitedly.

Before Jerry could reply, Stephen, roused from his semi-conscious condition by the rasping voice of the old soldier, slipped from the saddle and reeled drunkenly forward. The Colonel eyed him in amazement, quite certain from his demeanor that he was under the influence of liquor, and he would have turned away in disgust had not Stephen laid a heavy hand on his reluctant shoulder.

"You're right, sir," said Stephen, somewhat incoherently.

"We bring news—bad news—the worst possible." He passed his free hand wearily across his brow, as though to clear away the mists that befogged his brain. "It's—it's about Averill, sir. They've carried her off—to hell, I think. That's what Gorst said. Or was it Gretna? One of the two, sir, or perhaps both. I'm going after them. I'll shoot him on sight, damn him! I—I—swear——"

His voice trailed away into silence, and then, before Jerry could save him, he pitched headlong at the Colonel's feet. Immediately Jerry went down on his knees beside him, and promptly began to issue peremptory orders to one who had once been his commanding officer, and who, mystified beyond measure, obeyed him like a lamb.

"He must be got to bed at once, sir," said Jerry urgently, when, in response to the Colonel's roar, two grooms had hurried forward to render assistance. "God alone knows what he has suffered this day. Send for a doctor post haste. And he'll need a nurse—a good one—if his life is to be saved."

The men carried their burden into the house, and as they crossed the hall Sylvia Ravenscourt appeared. Taking in the situation at a glance, she very quickly assumed command, and, waving the Colonel and Jerry away, had the sick man carried upstairs.

"What does all this mean?" cried the Colonel, when he and Jerry were left alone.

In as few words as possible Jerry told of his finding of Stephen in Greypool Wood, and repeated the story which he had heard. All the time he was talking the enraged Colonel was cursing luridly under his breath and vowing dire vengeance on Sir Randolph Gorst.

"By Jupiter! he shall suffer for this," he cried, as Jerry finished his narrative. "He shall hang for it if I have to move heaven and earth to bring him to justice."

"Excuse me, sir, but we're wasting time," Jerry reminded him gently. "Have you sent anyone in pursuit?"

"No, sir, I haven't," replied the Colonel distractedly. "Lady Averill had gone to visit an aged woman with whom she often spends an afternoon, and she was not expected back until this evening. 'Twas only when darkness was falling and she had not returned that I began to get uneasy and sent Sergeant Ball to meet her; and I was about to set out myself when you and Mr. Burgoyne arrived. What think you is our best course?"

Jerry pondered a moment; then he said: "I go from here to meet one whose aid is worth that of a dozen ordinary men. I suggest that you send out horsemen—hard riders who will stop for nothing—along the main road to the north. Bid them ask at inn and posting-house as they go if anyone answering to Sir Randolph's description has been seen. If so, let them send one man back to you here as soon as they get definite news, when you must act as you think fit. But if, when they've covered thirty miles, they have procured no information which leads them to suppose that they're on the right track, they may as well return, for to proceed farther will be useless."

"Why?" snapped the Colonel.

"Because if Gorst has gone north, no matter what by-roads he may think it wise to make use of, he'll be compelled to return to the main highway long before he has covered thirty miles of his journey. And a man of his quality, particularly when accompanied by a lady, can't go far without being noticed."

"Hum! That's true," mused the Colonel. "But suppose the villain has gone south instead of north?"

Jerry shook his head. "I'm convinced that he spoke the truth to Mr. Burgoyne," he said sagely. "He had no object in lying, for he must have been quite certain that Mr. Burgoyne could do naught to make his plans miscarry."

"He has got a devil of a long start," said the Colonel heavily. He appeared to have aged a dozen years in the

past few minutes, and Jerry felt his heart go out to him in sympathy.

"He has, sir, but remember that he wasn't prepared for flight. He must have had many preparations to make which would delay him considerably, and I think we've good reason to hope, sir."

The Colonel sighed. "And I? What am I to do?" he asked despondently. "Am I to sit twiddling my thumbs whilst others do the work?"

"No, sir," replied Jerry emphatically, as he prepared to depart. "You have much to do to organize the pursuit, and 'tis essential that someone in authority should remain here. For 'tis to this house, Lady Averill's home, that news will naturally be sent, and it is possible that vital information which will demand prompt action may be received here at any moment. It seems to me that victory or defeat might very easily hang on such a thread, sir," he concluded quietly.

"It might be so," agreed the Colonel, with a grimace, "Yet I'll wager that, in your heart, you anticipate nothing of the sort, you rascal; you do but attempt to soothe my vanity. But have it your own way; my youth is gone, and only youth is good for hard riding over long distances."

Leaving the Grange, Jerry made haste to reach the cross-roads at which he hoped to meet Carless. But although his message to the highwayman had been one of the utmost urgency, he was not surprised to find that he was the first to reach the trysting-place, for it was by not means certain that Jack Hindle would find Carless without any difficulty.

However, he had not long to wait. Scarce twenty minutes had elapsed before Carless pulled up his hard-breathing mare under the four-fingered sign-post beside which Jerry awaited his coming.

"What's toward, Jerry?" he asked, without parley.

Briefly the ex-trooper narrated the events of the day, and not a word did Carless speak until he had finished.

Then, bidding his companion follow him, he wheeled his horse, and, to Jerry's surprise, set off at an easy canter along the road to the east. But Jerry knew better than to ask questions, and rode silently alongside until the other thought fit to explain.

"You are surprised at our direction," said Carless, after they had progressed thus for some hundreds of yards.

"I am," confessed Jerry.

"I thought so." Carless smiled. "The obvious course would be to ride north, and that is just what Gorst will expect us to do. Not that he fears pursuit; given a few hours more and pursuit would be futile. At least, so it seems to me."

"You think we couldn't catch him?"

"I think 'twould be useless to catch him," returned Carless significantly. He turned in his saddle and fixed upon his companion eyes that burned in the gloom like live coals. "Jerry, believe me when I tell you that Gorst is the damnedest villain that I have ever known. Unless we rescue Lady Averill tonight she will be neither maid, wife, nor widow when the dawn breaks."

Jerry started. "You mean?"

"I mean that by that time the only man who can aid her will be Gorst himself," replied Carless grimly. "And furthermore, I think it likely that his aid will not be forthcoming."

"My God! You think him capable of such infamy?" cried Jerry, aghast.

"He is capable of anything where his desires are concerned. But I think he has made a false move this time."

"You are hopeful, then?" ventured Jerry eagerly.

"I am more than that," responded Carless. "I am almost certain, for Gorst has not yet left the district."

"How do you know that?"

"Because I saw him less than a hour ago. He was

muffled in a long cloak and had a slouch hat drawn down over his eyes, but I recognized him nevertheless."

"Where was he when you saw him?"

Carless flushed a little at the question, but the darkness covered his confusion. "I was giving my mare a breather in the little coppice that stands opposite the gates of Blentham Lodge when I saw him come out, mount his horse, and ride away as if the devil were after him."

"Blentham Lodge!" echoed Jerry. "Isn't that where Lady Meltondene lives?"

"It is," said Carless. "And 'tis to Blentham Lodge that we are going. An I mistake not, we shall find Lady Averill Stapleton imprisoned there."

"What makes you think that?" asked Jerry, refraining from giving vent to the unbounded surprise that he felt at this announcement.

Carless hesitated, and when he did make reply his obvious reluctance and a note of irritation in his voice warned Jerry that he was treading on delicate ground, and would be wise to be chary of asking too many questions.

"Lady Meltondene has, for some obscure reason, abetted Gorst in his schemes again Burgoyne," Carless explained grudgingly. "Doubtless he has persuaded her that his carrying off of Lady Averill is a part of them, and she has consented to his arrangements. But, by heaven! he shall pay dearly for his temerity before this night is over. Something tells me that, ere many more hours are sped, I shall have squared my account with Sir Randolph Gorst. And that account is passing heavy," he concluded grimly.

He said no more until they had come within about fifty yards of the house they sought. Here he dismounted, and, ordering Jerry to do likewise, he led his mare into a field and tethered her to a bush which stood a few yards from the gate.

"Now listen carefully, Jerry," he said, in an undertone. "First of all, we will reconnoitre the house. I know the

place fairly well, and it should not be difficult to find out in which room Lady Averill is imprisoned. That done, the rest is, I think, easy. The house is small, and apart from the grooms and the butler, the servants are all women. The only one likely to give trouble is her ladyship's French maid. She is a vixen and passionately devoted to her mistress, and she would sacrifice anything, even her life, to serve her."

Jerry smiled. "We won't drive her as far as that," he said jocularly. "You propose to rescue Lady Averill by force, then?"

"Certainly not!" Carless's words were sharp and stern. "Dismiss that from your mind. There must be no violence."

"You mistake me, Ned. You always say that the boldest course is generally the safest, and in this case I agree. I take it that you'll simply march into the house, break open the door of the room in which Lady Averill is imprisoned, and carry her out."

"Then you take it wrong," retorted Carless acidly.

"But why not?" persisted Jerry. "That is surely the simplest way, for you have already said that there is nothing to fear from the servants. Or does the thought of the French maid scare you?" he queried slyly.

But Carless was in no mood for jesting. "When I want your advice I'll ask for it," he said curtly. "Your plan would doubtless be successful, but it does not accord with what you would call my whim, Jerry. I am determined that, no matter what the cost, Lady Meltondene shall be saved from the consequences of her folly in abetting Gorst in this affair."

"But she——"

"Enough!" Carless's tone was peremptory. "If you are not prepared to carry out my instructions, then I shall be glad if you'll be good enough to betake yourself elsewhere."

Jerry made no reply. He knew better than to run counter to Carless when he was in this mood, and he had implicit faith in the ability of the highwayman to carry to a success-

ful issue any plans that he had in mind. So he stood in silence awaiting orders, and in a moment or two Carless laughed shortly.

"You are not going, then?" he queried quizzically. "Very well. Follow me."

He led the way across the dark field in which they had tethered their horses, and presently stopped at a high brick wall which barred their path.

"This is the garden wall," he whispered. "'Tis ivy-clad a little farther along, and easy to scale." He groped along the wall for a few yards. "Here we are. Up with you, and make no noise."

Within a minute or two they stood, tense and listening, in the gloomy, silent garden. Not a sound could they hear save the soft, fitful sigh of the warm night breeze as it stirred in the tall tree-tops; and almost immediately Carless took Jerry by the hand and led him cautiously along the smooth-shaven grass which bordered a winding path. They were approaching one side of the house, and very soon they came in sight of it. Carless paused as they did so, and pointed to a solitary light that gleamed in an unshuttered first-floor window which opened on to a balcony.

"I'll wager Lady Averill is in that room," he whispered triumphantly, a quiver of excitement in his voice. "And I'm going to make certain. Remain here until I return."

He pulled off his riding-boots, and Jerry watched his dim figure as he sped swiftly over the lawn and clambered, cat-like and noiseless, up one of the pillars which supported the balcony. Nor was he long gone upon his errand. Long before Jerry expected him he was back again and putting on his boots.

"Is she there?" asked Jerry excitedly.

"Aye, she's there all right," he returned grimly. "'Tis a vastly clever business, Jerry. She lies moaning in bed, with all the paraphernalia of a sick-room around her. There is a bandage tied tight round her head, chin, and mouth to

hide the gag which prevents her screaming, and I can tell from the way she lies that she is bound hand and foot. By the side of the bed sits Gorst's lackey, suitably attired, in the solicitious attitude of a doctor who dare not leave his patient; and whilst I watched, the French maid flitted into the room bearing a basin of hot water, a medicine bottle and some clean linen for bandages. She winked significantly at the lackey as she placed her burden on a table by the side of the bed, and he grinned at her in reply, but not a word was spoken. I wonder whose brain was responsible for setting the scene so artfully—Gorst's or Lady Meltondene's," he mused, stroking his chin.

"But what is the object of it?" asked Jerry, scratching his head in perplexity.

"Why, 'tis done to deceive the servants. An I mistake not, Lady Averill was brought here as a very sick woman and conveyed straight to bed. Gorst's man, posing as the doctor, keeps guard over her; and I'll wager that, apart from the French maid, not another servant in the house is aware of the patient's identity."

"Hum! The lackey's presence complicates matters," grumbled Jerry. "He is sure to be armed."

"And have you no weapon?" queried Carless sharply.

"None. Remember that I landed into this affair quite unexpectedly."

"Then take this," said Carless, thrusting a double-barrelled pistol into his hand. "'Tis loaded and primed, and I have another in my pocket. We've lost time enough. So here is my plan. I'm going to pay a formal call on Lady Meltondene immediately. That, with luck, will keep her occupied until your task is complete. Whilst I am with her I shall contrive something that will take Gorst's fellow out of that room. You will be waiting on the balcony, and the moment you see him leave you will enter by the window, which is open, and carry Lady Averill away. You can lower her from the balcony by knotting a sheet to her bonds.

Waste no time in untying her until you get back to the horses. Await me there; but if I don't join you within a quarter of an hour, mount Lady Averill in front of you and make all speed to Oldfield Grange. And keep your pistol handy as you go, in case you encounter Gorst."

Left alone, Jerry followed his leader's previous example and removed his boots, depositing them at the foot of the post which Carless had climbed. Then, with an agility which matched that of the highwayman, he mounted to the balcony, and, crouching beneath the low window-sill, peered into the room. The lattice casement was open, and the curtains, disturbed by the breeze, were not properly closed, with the result that he had little difficulty in seeing all that the room contained.

Averill lay facing the window, her terror-filled violet eyes wide open. The pseudo-doctor sat at her bedside, half asleep and yawning. It was quite evident that he anticipated no disturbance of his peace from outside, and he paid not the slightest attention to his prisoner.

For nearly ten minutes nothing happened. Then a slim, handsome, foreign-looking woman of about thirty-five entered the room, and addressed herself to the man.

"Milady she want to spik to you," she said, with a half-insolent, half-provocative lift of her eyebrows.

"Wants to speak to me! What for?" he cried, obviously astonished.

"I dunno. She 'ave a visitaire, one who come 'ere often. Oh, do not be afraid," she encouraged him satirically. "'E is quite 'armless and ver' nice. Come wiz me."

After a moment's hesitation he grumblingly followed her from the room. Promptly Jerry released the casement stay, and, pulling the window wide, climbed over the sill. Averill saw him, and the alarm in her eyes gave place to incredulous joy as she recognized in her visitor one whom she had seen on more than one occasion in intimate conversation with Sergeant Ball. Smiling at her reassuringly

as he approached across the large apartment, he whispered confidently:

"I'll have you out of this in no time, ma'am."

But as he reached her side the sound of footsteps ascending the stairs without fell upon his ear. At once his eyes darted hither and thither in search of a hiding-place. He had no time to reach the window through which he had come, but heavy velvet curtains close beside him told of the alcove which they concealed, and without hesitation he stepped behind them.

He was only just in time. Indeed, the folds of the curtains had not ceased to move when the door opened to admit the French maid, who had come to take the lackey's place until he should return. This placed Jerry in a quandary; and his expression was doleful in the extreme as, peeping through the curtains, he watched her sit down beside the bed with her back to him. He glanced at Averill, and noted with satisfaction that she had closed her eyes in feigned sleep. It was quite obvious that the maid had noticed nothing amiss, although the window through which he had come was now wide open to the night.

He set his wits to work. Here was a situation which had not been foreseen, and for the life of him he could devise no means of dealing with it. He had been warned against violence, yet how was he to rescue Averill in such circumstances without it? But in any case he could not fight with a woman; and to attempt to hold her up at the point of his pistol whilst he released Averill was far too risky a procedure. If he were any judge of women, no pistol in the world would have power to prevent her screaming at the top of her voice the instant she set eyes on him!

He was still pondering the matter when the man returned. Promptly the maid rose to her feet and tripped to the door, which he held open for her.

"You 'ave not been long, monsieur," she said, stopping close beside him and lifting inviting eyes to him. "I am

going out for leetle walk now. Per'aps I meet someone. Do you not wish that it was you I go to meet, eh? Ze garden is ver' dark, monsieur."

Seizing her suddenly round the waist, the man pulled her to him roughly and kissed her full on her pouting red lips. She returned the kiss with fierce ardor, her body pressed close to his; then she whispered something in his ear, laughed lightly, and was gone.

Smiling reminiscently, the man closed the door, and, after snuffing the candles, seated himself in the chair which the maid had vacated. This time Jerry did not hesitate. Ned's orders against violence must go hang; they were never meant to apply to such a situation as this.

Stepping out silently from behind the curtains, he brought down the heavy butt of his pistol with all his force on the head of the unsuspecting man. The fellow went down like a log, and without hesitation Jerry leapt to the bedside, and, with a whispered caution, removed the gag from Averill's mouth and transferred it to that of her gaoler. Then, whipping back the bedclothes which covered her, he took a knife from his pocket, and, once again disregarding Ned's express instructions, cut away the knots of the ropes that bound her. This done, he helped her to rise, and dropping on his knees beside the unconscious man, he swiftly and skilfully trussed him tight with the same cords. Next, with an easy strength that made Averill wonder, he lifted him and placed him on the bed, where, with a cord snatched from one of the window curtains, he tied him head and foot to the bedrails, so that when he came to his senses he would be unable to move an inch either to right or left. And after removing two sheets, which he knotted together, he drew up the remainder of the bedclothes until they completely covered the man's form and face, so that anyone peeping in at the door to see if Averill were still there might well imagine that she had snuggled down under the bedclothes.

"Now, madam, quick is the word!" he whispered urgently.

"I shall have to lower you from that balcony and contrive to get you over the garden wall, so let me tie the end of these sheets round you."

A woman less courageous than Averill might have fainted with pain which the freshly-circulating blood, long retarded by her bonds, caused her. But not a murmur passed her lips. She allowed Jerry to make the sheets fast round her waist and lift her over the sill on to the balcony, and by her acuteness of perception made his task of lowering her to the ground an easy one.

Soon he was carrying both her and his boots silently across the lawn and along the grass-bordered path by which he had come. The wall proved more difficult. Jerry climbed up the ivy to the top, and then, bidding Averill take her time and to help him by getting such foothold as she could among the clinging tendrils of the ivy, he managed to haul her up, but not without making considerably more noise than he relished. To lower her into the field was the work of a few moments, and taking her bodily in his arms again, he hurried across the field to where the horses were tethered.

Here he laid her gently down on the grass and compelled her to drink from his flask. Then, without asking her permission, he started to massage first her arms and then her legs, at the same time answering her eager, whispered questions as briefly as he could. Her gratitude to him for her deliverance embarrassed him woefully, and at last he said gruffly:

"'Tis Ned Carless you have to thank, madam, not me. But for him nothing could have saved you. And talk of angels, here he comes."

Silent as a spectre Carless appeared out of the darkness. Averill sat upright as he approached her, and before he could prevent her she had seized his hand and kissed it fervently.

"Sir, you and your friend have made me your debtor for

life," she said, in low, earnest tones. "You have saved me from shame unspeakable, and for that I——"

"Nay, nay, madam, 'tis no time for thanks," he interupted her gently. "We are not yet out of the wood, and the sooner we are away from here the better." He signalled to Jerry, who had untethered the horses, to mount. "I am sorry we haven't got a spare horse, madam," he continued. "You'll have to ride with Jerry, for it may be that I shall be compelled to leave you ere we reach your home."

He offered no further explanation, but assisted her to mount in front of his companion. Then, after leading both horses out of the field, he sprang into his own saddle, and, urging his horse in front of Jerry's, proceeded at a good round pace along the dark road. He rode in momentary expectation of encountering Gorst, but in this he was disappointed, for they reached the gates of Oldfield Grange without meeting a soul. Here he halted, and, turning in his saddle, said:

"You are at your home, Lady Averill. Jerry will conduct you within and hand you over to the charge of Colonel Oldfield. I regret that I cannot myself perform that pleasing duty, but I am urgently needed elsewhere. Should it chance that the Colonel be out, Jerry, you will stay with Lady Averill until he returns. You understand?"

"Yes," returned Jerry curtly, not relishing the embarrassing task of receiving the many expressions of gratitude which, as Lady Averill's rescuer, he knew would be showered upon him.

"Good. I shall be at the barn shortly after midnight. Meet me there. Good-night, madam."

And, without giving Averill time to say a word, he wheeled his horse sharply and disappeared into the night.

CHAPTER XXIII

TELLS HOW CARLESS CAME JUST TOO LATE TO PAY HIS DEBT

THE needlework with which Barbara Meltondene was endeavoring to combat the tedium of the evening was not proving the antidote to unpleasant thought that she had hoped. It certainly kept her fingers busy, but it left her mind free to wander untrammelled. And her mind was playing her sorry tricks.

Ever since this morning, when Sir Randolph Gorst had, with colossal effrontery, rushed into her house to tell her that he had found Lady Averill Stapleton hurt and unconscious in the road, she had had a sense of foreboding—an uneasy, prophetic feeling of coming evil. Yet she had suspected nothing when she bade him go and fetch the injured woman into the house whilst she and her maid went upstairs to prepare a room for her reception; it was only when Gorst entered the bedroom accompanied by two villainous-looking ruffians, who carried between them an improvised stretcher upon which lay a bound and helpless woman, that she had discovered that it was a prisoner he brought and not an invalid. For the moment she was nonplussed and bereft of speech by the sheer audacity of the proceeding, but no sooner had the men set down their burden and left the apartment than she turned on Gorst like a fury and demanded an explanation.

"It means, madam, that I have captured my heart's desire, whilst you have to your hand the means to appease your hatred of Burgoyne," he replied, with an insolent laugh of triumph.

"You fool! Do you imagine that I am going to abet you in this?" she cried fiercely.

"I do," he returned confidently. "Why not? All I ask is that you keep her here for a few hours until——"

"I will not," she cried vehemently, stamping her foot. "Claudine, release her and let her go."

The maid stepped forward to do her bidding, but Gorst held up his hand. "One moment," he said. "Is your memory so short, Barbara, that you have forgotten the public affront this woman recently put upon you? Have you forgotten her contempt for you, the scorn with which she spoke of you, the insults she offered you?"

He stopped to let his words take effect, and he saw with satisfaction her bosom heave tempestuously and her cheeks flush. He noted the glance of hate that she cast upon the wide-eyed woman who lay dumb and helpless on the bed, and without waiting for her to speak he hammered home the impression which he knew he had made upon her reluctance to aid him.

"The county has cold-shouldered you, Barbara," he continued blandly. "Whose fault was that? Lady Averill Stapleton's. A word from her would have made you secure in the social position which is yours by right. Did she speak that word? No. Instead she let it be understood that she regarded you as an outcast, a pariah. Why, then, should you lift a finger to help her now that the power has passed from her hands to yours?"

He paused again, and his own eyes gleamed with triumph as he noted the fury that blazed in hers.

"I do not ask your active help," he pursued craftily. "In the remote event of trouble, you can always plead that you were unaware that I had deceived you when I told you that Lady Averill was hurt. The enmity that exists between you is widely know, and you will be readily believed if you say that, although you were willing to give

her shelter as a sick woman, you refused to see her or to hold converse with her."

"What do you want me to do?" she asked in a low, half-strangled voice, after a short interval of silence.

"Little," he said eagerly. "Claudine here is to be trusted, I presume?"

"Implicitly," replied Barbara emphatically, as the maid tossed a scornful head and pouted.

"Good. None of your servants saw my men carry Lady Averill upstairs, for I had taken the precaution of sending them away to get water and bandages and other things. They are entirely unsuspicious, and they can be kept so. I'll hasten away now and bring back one who will pose as a doctor. Here he will remain in charge until I can get Lady Averill away, so that you will have no responsibility whatever."

"And for how long does she remain here?"

"Until tonight."

"But that is absurd," cried Barbara. "They'll be searching for her long before then."

"And who would dream of seeking her at Lady Meltondene's? You see danger where none exists, Barbara," he chided her softly. "Obviously I dare not take her away in the daylight, for even if I succeeded in keeping her face hidden I could scarce disguise from everyone that a woman travelled with me, and I should leave behind me a trail that a child could follow. But if I set out at, say, midnight, I am safe from prying eyes. And remember that, once she is my wife, Burgoyne will again be eligible, and if it please you to favor him—well, you are a very desirable woman," he concluded, with an infinity of meaning.

That last clever remark of his had clinched the matter, and Barbara had consented to offer no further opposition to his villainy. But she had many qualms of conscience during the long hours that followed. These had driven her to try to persuade Averill to promise not to call for

help or attempt to escape if her gag and bonds were removed, but her prisoner had obstinately refrained from making the sign of acquiescence for which she pleaded. At length the scorn which she read in Averill's eyes forced her to abandon her persuasions, and she left her to the mercies of Claudine and the lackey who posed as a doctor.

But she had failed miserably to assume the cloak of indifference as to what might befall this woman whom she hated. For all her callousness, the fate which awaited Averill made her shudder. She had no illusions as to Gorst's behavior as a lover; she knew him for the ruthless, licentious bully that he was. A dozen times she was on the point of going upstairs and setting Averill free; but each time the memory of some former slight, or the thought that Averill would surely be her successful rival for Stephen Burgoyne's love, checked her, and she remained inactive.

And when darkness fell, and still Gorst did not come to claim his prisoner, she had become thoroughly alarmed. She was unaware that, not half an hour before the candles were lighted, the baronet had surreptitiously visited the house in order to ease his mind as to his captive's security and to give his lackey further instructions. However, her alarm was quieted a little when the lackey, upon being questioned, told her that he did not expect Sir Randolph until ten o'clock, but it was redoubled later when the butler announced that Mr. Carless had called and wished to see her. Carless had visited her often of late, but never had he come at so unconventional an hour as this; and it was in fear and trembling that she had bidden the butler admit him.

She had steeled herself as best she could for the interview, for she valued Carless's ardent friendship not a little. He treated her always with a reverence and homage which was balm to the soul of a woman at whom Society looked askance. Furthermore, she knew that he loved her; and no woman is quite indifferent to the true and constant love

of a man, no matter how lowly his station in life or disreputable his character.

So sure had she been that this unexpected call had to do with Averill's disappearance that her relief was unbounded when, after apologizing for the lateness of his visit and indulging in a few moments' idle conversation, he informed her that he had lost a riding-whip, and as he happened to be passing her house on his way homeward he had called to see if by any chance he had left it there.

"The thing is of no great value," he said deprecatingly, "but it was given to me by a dear friend who died in my arms, and 'tis for that reason I prize it. Think you that one of your servants might have seen it?"

"All the servants are out, with the exception of Bingley and Claudine," she explained hastily, as she pulled the bell-rope. "I didn't expect visitors tonight, and I allowed them to go and see the preparations for Bolderburn Fair."

This was true. She had thought it wiser to get rid of them until such time as Averill should have been taken away, and she had given them permission to stay out until midnight, in the hope that by that time her dangerous and distasteful task would be done.

Of course, both the butler and the maid, when questioned, pleaded ignorance regarding the missing whip, but, despite their protestations, Carless did not seem satisfied. He mused for a moment after they had been dismissed, and then he said with disconcerting suddenness:

"Who was the man I saw just now looking out of one of the upstairs windows? Was it not Sir Randolph Gorst's lackey?"

Barbara went white to the lips. It was on the tip of her tongue to deny all knowledge of the man of whom Carless spoke, but something in his attitude warned her of the unwisdom of such a course.

"'Tis possible," she said, with ill-assumed indifference.

"He came here a little while ago with a message, and as he is enamored of my maid it may be that he still lingers."

"Then, if so, may I speak to him?" he asked pleasantly. "I passed him on the road yesterday just before I missed my whip, and he may have picked it up."

The suggestion was so improbable that Barbara's nervous apprehension was instantly intensified. But from the questions which he put to the lackey, who presently appeared, Carless seemed to be concerned only with his lost keepsake. Certainly he kept the man waiting a considerable time whilst he finished relating a lengthy and rather pointless story to Barbara, but upon reflection this seemed to her to be devoid of significance.

Yet when Carless took his departure Barbara's unease did not go with him. Instead, she became the prey of ever-increasing fear—a fear that was none the less disturbing because it was intangible; and so strongly did this fear obsess her that it was with a sense of unspeakable relief that, shortly after ten o'clock, she heard Bingley announce Sir Randolph Gorst.

"Show him in, Bingley," she said, "and then you may retire. I shall not require you again tonight."

"Very good, my lady," said the man.

The baronet's appearance as he strode somewhat unsteadily into the room was not very reassuring. It was patent to Barbara that he had been drinking, and his face was flushed and his attitude truculent.

"Well, madam, I have come for my bride," he said thickly. "Is she ready for me?"

Barbara sneered. "For anything I know she is as you left her," she said coldly. "She interests me little, though I find it in me to pity her."

"Pity her? Why?" The look on Gorst's face was ugly, but in her contempt for him she disregarded it.

"Because of her bridegroom," she replied.

"Be careful, Barbara," he warned her. "And remember

that once upon a time that same bridegroom was nearly yours."

"I have never ceased to thank the gods for preventing it," she retorted fearlessly.

"Haven't you indeed?" He took a step towards her and suddenly seized her by the wrist. "Then what would you say if I let the woman upstairs go hang and took you to my arms instead? After all, methinks I should be making a good bargain, for you are the most alluring woman I ever saw. Well, what would you say to that?"

He glared into her face with flaming, gloating eyes, but she did not flinch. She returned his stare with disdainful hauteur, and a little smile of contempt played about her lips as she said with quiet emphasis:

"I would rather be dead!"

For an instant she thought he was going to strike her; then he flung her roughly from him and lurched to the door. With his hand on the handle he turned to her again.

"Farewell for the present, madam," he said. "The carriage which is to take Lady Averill away will be here at half-past eleven. That gives me an hour in her company—sixty long minutes during which she and I will be alone, without possibility of disturbance." He laughed gratingly. "And when those minutes have sped she will be glad to go anywhere with me!"

Barbara started violently. The significant manner in which his words were uttered roused all her womanly instincts to instant rebellion. Her eyes and cheeks flamed with outraged anger, but when she spoke the tones of her voice were as tinkling ice.

"Not very long ago, Sir Randolph Gorst, you claimed to be a gentleman. Have you abandoned that claim?"

He flushed. "The Polite World—the world of Lady Averill Stapleton, Buck Burgoyne, and their like—has hitherto denied my claim," he retorted sullenly.

"What does that matter?" she countered swiftly. "A

gentleman only forfeits his claim to the title when he forfeits his honor and his self-respect."

"Bah! You talk like a snivelling parson," he sneered.

"Perhaps I do, but methinks you need the sermon. If you are going to marry Averill, how will it help you if you break her heart beforehand?"

A leering smile broke on his flushed face—the smile of a satyr. "Ah! There you have it," he cried. *"If* I marry Averill. Who can tell? After all, I think that, as a wife, you would suit me better, Barbara. But we shall see."

Before she could utter another word he was gone. For a moment she stood bewildered; then she ran to a writing-table and began feverishly to pull open its drawers. Her mind was made up. Much as she hated Averill, she would somehow save her from the dreadful fate which threatened her, and to that end she sought a pistol. Almost immediately she found one; but it was unloaded, and she had no idea where powder and ball might be.

Then heavy footsteps told her that Gorst was returning, and fearful lest he should suspect her purpose, she ran back to the couch on which lay her sewing, and, picking up the gleaming silks, began to ply her needle. In her haste she upset the work-basket which stood on the arm of the couch, and its contents were spread in confusion on the seat beside her.

But she had not had time to remedy this when the door burst open, and Gorst, the picture of demoniacal rage, appeared on the threshold. He stood there eyeing her with baleful eyes for an appreciable time before he closed the door behind him. Then he turned the key which was in the lock and put it in his pocket. His action had a dread significance for Barbara, and instantly she rose from her seat and stood facing him in the attitude of one who expects physical attack.

"You damned traitress!" he snarled, coming towards her. "Where is she?"

"She? Who?"

"You know who! Averill!" he shouted. "She has gone—vanished—and Thorp lies bound and gagged in her place."

"Gone! Impossible!" To anyone less blinded by rage than Gorst it must have been patent that her incredulous surprise was genuine; but he was oblivious to everything except his own fury, and his conviction that it was to Barbara that Averill owed her escape remained unshaken.

"You are an admirable actress, madam, but, by God! I'll teach you to act before I'm done with you!" he cried, beside himself with passion. "Do you expect me to believe that she could have escaped unaided in this manner without your hearing a sound? Bah! I'm not such a credulous fool as all that, you——"

"I know nothing whatever about it," she asserted calmly, but pallid to the lips with fear. "I have seen nothing, heard nothing; and if——"

"Shut your lying mouth, you jade!" he snarled. "How could anyone outside your own household even know that she was here, let alone rescue her? The men who assisted me are all miles away, and lie helplessly drunk in a tavern. You have managed the thing cleverly, madam. With the aid of your grooms you trussed up my lackey and let Lady Averill go, and then you sent your servants out so that they could not betray you to me."

"Please don't be ridiculous," she said scornfully. "Ask your lackey. Doubless he will tell you the truth."

"My lackey is unconscious, and like to be. If I be any judge, he has concussion of the brain, and 'twill be many a day ere he can tell his story. And you knew that, didn't you, madam? But no matter. You have chosen, and you must abide by the consequences. If I can't have Averill I'll have you, and, by heaven! I'll take you now!"

Without further warning he seized Barbara by the shoulders and began to force her backwards on to the couch.

She was a strong woman, and fought him with the fury of a tigress, but her efforts were of no avail. Gorst laughed at her blows and her scratches, and little by little he bent her over until, still struggling violently, she lay on her back on the cushions with two cruel, relentless hands holding her down.

Twice did she scream during the struggle, but her cries brought her no succor. The only other living soul in the house was the butler, Bingley, and it was unlikely that he, sleeping in a back room on the second floor, would hear her. Gorst's evil, passion-lit face was now close to hers, and he smiled triumphantly as he saw the stark, despairing dread that shone in her eyes. Her breath came in short, quick gasps, and gradually her struggles grew weaker, until at length she lay still and quiet in his grasp.

"So, madam, you submit, eh?" he said, with a cruel laugh. "That is wise, for there is none to aid you, and your struggles only prolong matters to no purpose."

He leaned forward to kiss her lips, but with a swift turn of her head she evaded the caress. So, releasing her right arm, he brutally seized her chin in a vice-like grip, and, twisting her head round, he held her whilst he pressed his hot lips to hers.

But even as he did so Barbara's fingers touched something cold and hard which lay on the couch at her side. It was a large pair of scissors which had fallen from her overturned work-basket. Instinctively her fingers closed round the naked steel, and, scarcely aware of what she did, she lifted her hand and plunged the closed, sharp-pointed blades deep into Gorst's side.

With a wild cry of anguish he released his hold on her and staggered back a pace. And at that moment a single shot rang out, and Gorst pitched forward lifeless to the floor.

Almost fainting with horror, Barbara turned her head towards the window, and immediately her staring eyes rested

on the grim, masked figure of a man who stood in the curtained embrasure, smoking pistol in hand, regarding the prostrate body of the baronet with a sardonic smile.

With an effort Barbara sat upright, and the intruder advanced quickly into the room until he stood close beside her.

"Is he dead?" she asked in a fearful whisper, her own possible peril from the newcomer forgotten in the tragedy of the moment.

"I trust so," he replied callously. "'Tis time he ceased to encumber the earth."

He knelt at Gorst's side, but almost at once he was on his feet again. "Sir Randolph Gorst will trouble you no more, madam," he said curtly.

Barbara covered her face with her hands and burst into a violent fit of weeping. "My God! I've killed him," she moaned. "I—a murderess! Heaven help me! Heaven help me!"

In an instant the man whipped off mask and wig, and, sitting down on the couch at her side, he put his arm round her and pressed her close to his breast. His action so startled her that she ceased her sobs and lifted her head in alarm, only to let it fall again with a sigh of relief on to the man's shoulder.

"You, Ned!" she said, in a grateful whisper. "Thank God! 'Twas you who shot him?"

"It was."

The knowledge that it was Carless who had come to her aid seemed to have both comforted and calmed her, and her voice was even, though infinitely sad, when she spoke again.

"Ah, Ned, if you had only fired ten seconds sooner!" she said wistfully. "You were just too late."

"Too late! Why?"

"Look at him." She pointed a finger at the dead man, but kept her eyes steadily averted. "See you the scissors that

are fast in his side? Those scissors are mine, and 'twas I who struck with them the blow that killed him."

Carless laughed sceptically. "Nothing of the kind, Barbara," he said. "Such a wound as your puny weapon made, far from killing him, would not have kept him abed a week! 'Twas my bullet that sent him to his last account, for it drilled him clean through the head."

"Are you sure of that, Ned?" she cried, raising eyes full of hope to his.

"Absolutely certain," he asserted.

Barbara hesitated a moment; then, with sublime courage, she rose to her feet and approached the dead man. She forced herself to look first at the bullet-hole in his temple and then at the welling stream which oozed from his side and formed an ever-growing crimson strain on the pale carpet. Only a very few moments did she stand so, but those moments were sufficient to enable her to grasp the naked truth. The wound which she had dealt Gorst was a fatal one, and Carless, fully aware of that grim fact, had fired his shot, not to kill, but so that he could take upon himself the guilt which was hers.

She turned again to her companion and shook her head sadly. "'Tis no use, Ned," she said. "I see it all too plainly. Such chivalry as yours is almost past belief, but it cannot avail me one——"

But he interrupted her impatiently. "Your talk of chivalry is nonsense, Barbara," he cried roughly. "I came here for the express purpose of shooting Gorst. Why otherwise should I have come masked and wigged in my old character of Black Dick?"

"Black Dick!" she echoed, in wondering bewilderment. "Are you Black Dick, then?"

"I am," he confessed grimly. "So, you see, I was a criminal already, Barbara, and one crime more or less is of little moment. But I made a vital mistake tonight. After Lady Averill's rescue I knew that Gorst would vent

his spleen on you, and in my haste to get back here I rode across country. My horse fell at a fence and broke a leg, and I had to shoot him. I made what speed I could on foot, but when I reached your gate I heard you scream and knew what was afoot. Had it not been that the French window was open I should have come too late."

"I have already told you that you came too late, and so you did," she declared. "You cannot deceive me in this. 'Twas I killed Gorst, not you."

"You did not," he cried vehemently. "You struck him in self-defence, and rightly so, but——"

She stopped him with a gesture, and, coming slowly towards him, she placed both her hands on his shoulders and gazed deep into his eyes.

"How you must love me!" she breathed softly.

"Love you!" he echoed. "Have I not told you a dozen times that I adore you?"

"You have," she said wistfully. "And now you have proved it to the very hilt. But you must go, and that quickly. The servants will be back soon, and then——"

She paused, and her eyes filled again with fear. Without hesitation, Carless pulled her to him and kissed her passionately.

"And then what?" he asked fiercely. "Are you going to wait here until the constables come? Are you going to the gallows for a man who was not fit to live?"

"God knows!" she answered wearily, but making no attempt to free herself from his close embrace.

"Aye, He does, and so do I," he declared. "You are coming with me—now! There are horses in your stables, and with ordinary luck we can get to Liverpool and set sail long before they can overtake us. Are you willing?"

"You mean that you will go with me—that you will aid a murderess to escape?" she said tremulously, gazing at him with wondering eyes.

"No, I mean that I offer to the most wonderful woman

in the world my life and my love. What matter whether 'twas you or I who quenched the vital spark in that libertine? Whatever the law may say, we know that he richly merited his fate. Will you come with me?"

She shook her head. "I cannot allow you to sacrifice yourself for my sake," she said obstinately.

"'Tis no sacrifice," he urged. "Crisp knows me for Black Dick, and already he seeks to arrest me." This was not correct, but to Barbara, distraught as she was, the words had the ring of truth, and she never thought to question them. "I have long been prepared for flight, and I have money invested abroad—enough to keep us in comfort. Some of it was ill-gotten, maybe, but what does that matter?"

"Then you will still be obliged to flee the country even if I refuse to go with you?" she cried eagerly.

"I shall."

"And if I come, what then?"

"Then I shall be the happiest man alive," he said simply.

"And is that all?"

"All? What more could there be?" he asked, puzzled by the question.

"Have—have you thought of my happiness?" she asked timidly, in turn.

"I think of naught else, dear," he replied earnestly. "And if you will become my wife I'll devote my life to proving that to you."

"You offer me marriage?" she cried, the light of a wonderful joy dawning in her eyes. "After all that has occurred?"

"Why, of course!" He wrinkled his brows in perplexity. "That I am presumptuous I know, but I beg of you, pray of you, to accept my name, unworthy though it be, and with it my unswerving, deathless devotion. Something tells me that you would not regret it, Barbara."

For answer she took his face between her two hands and

kissed him full on the lips. Then she broke from his embrace, and again placing her hands on his shoulders she gazed at him long and steadfastly with eyes in which the unshed tears gleamed brightly.

"Regret it, did you say, Ned?" she breathed at last. "That I shall never do. From henceforth you are my knight; would that the woman who dubs you so were more worthy of your homage!" She pulled him to her and kissed him again, very humbly, very tenderly. "The time is passing, Ned. Come," she said softly.

And, heedless of the man who lay there stark and cold, hand in hand they crossed the threshold of the open window and stepped out on to the path which led through the darkness to a new life and a strange land.

CHAPTER XXIV

BRINGS THE TALE TO AN END

SITTING by the open casement, Averill gazed out into the warm darkness of the velvet, star-spangled night. Away towards the horizon gleamed the thin sickle of a young moon, its faint light throwing into soft silhouette the form of tall poplar and stately elm. From the garden below rose the indescribable smell of autumn—that strange and subtle perfume which carries in its sensuous blend a grim reminder of decay and death.

Averill sighed as this perfume ascended to her nostrils. Death had been very close to this house for many a long day, watching and waiting always for the carelessness or neglect which would be the signal for him to enter. But that signal had never been given. Night and day had she and Sylvia striven to keep the dread visitor at bay, fighting an uphill battle with the odds against them, but never faltering in their self-appointed task. And that task had been made ten times more difficult by the patient himself. Time and again had the doctor roundly declared that Stephen had no intention of getting well.

What were a couple of broken ribs and a lacerated back to a strong man? the exasperated physician had asked contemptuously. What if his wounds had been exposed to the sun and the flies for seven or eight hours? Was that any excuse for dying? Pooh! 'Twas a malady of the mind from which he suffered, else he had been well again long ago.

In vain had Averill recounted the agonies which Stephen

must have endured in his ride from the Nag's Head to Oldfield Grange; the doctor, hard as nails himself, would have none of it.

"Delirium was to be expected, of course, madam," he said irritably. "But his refusal to answer to my treatment is just damned obstinacy and nothing else. 'Tis his mind, I tell you. Get his mind at rest and he is cured."

And now, at long last, Stephen was on the highroad to recovery. He was out of danger, the doctor said, but his progress was painfully slow. Listless and weak, he took no interest in anything, and, although he had been given permission to talk, he said little—at least, to Averill.

Alverford, who had visited him whenever he had been permitted, and Sylvia Ravenscourt were more successful with him, but Averill knew nothing of this. Sylvia had forbidden Harry to mention it to her, astutely realizing that to do so might be to make the situation more painful to her. A woman's judgment in such cases is usually sound, and Harry, to whom Sylvia's word was law, never thought to question it.

To Averill, sitting idle at the window whilst her patient slept, there came a feeling of sadness so poignant that the tears sprang unbidden to her eyes. Perhaps it was the faintly luminous mystery of the autumn evening that affected her; perhaps the plaintive sigh of the fitful breeze, which, at long intervals, whispered of the coming of winter, chilled her spirits, for once she shivered as though icy fingers had touched her.

But she did not close the window. Instead, she leaned over the sill and gazed out into the silent garden. Away towards the summer-house two tiny pin-points of light which alternately glowed and faded told her that the Colonel and Sergeant Ball were smoking their pipes together and making the most of a delightful warmth that must, before many more days had passed, give place to the bitter blasts of winter. Very soon now the beauty of the garden would

be gone. Many of the trees were already bare, and ere long not a green leaf would remain except on laurel, privet and their like.

Formerly Averill had watched the passing of summer with scarce a regret, but this time it was somehow different. It seemed to her that with it went the self-sufficiency which had hitherto been her proudest possession. The past few weeks, devoted to the single object of saving a man's life, had altered her outlook, given her a peep into the eyes of stark reality. Things are apt to assume their true perspective when death is nigh; thoughts kindly or unworthy, words courteous or malicious, deeds generous or selfish—all hitherto regarded as trivial or unimportant—loom big and portentous; the molehills which have been magnified into mountains shrink into their proper insignificance.

Soon this man whom she had nursed so tirelessly would go out of her life, leaving behind him—what? Just an emptiness which no one else could ever fill; that was all.

A slight sound from the bed made her turn her head sharply, and although the room was in darkness she knew that Stephen was awake and gazing at her.

"Is that you, Lady Averill?" he asked presently.

"Yes." The commonplace word was spoken like a caress, but to Stephen, occupied with his thoughts, it conveyed nothing beyond the information he sought.

"Why do you sit in darkness?"

"The night is very beautiful, and you were asleep," she answered him softly. "My duty accorded with my desires, and I refrained from having the candles lighted. But now that you are awake I will ring for lights."

"Nay, nay," he protested, as she moved towards the bell. "I also prefer the dark. I pray you sit down again."

She obeyed him, but instead of taking her former seat she sat down in a chair which stood by his bedside.

"'Tis nearly time for your medicine," she said presently, more for something to say than for anything else.

He did not reply; but after a while he asked abruptly: "Is there any further news of Ned?"

"None," she replied. "Methinks we may assume that he got safely away, and Lady Meltondene as well, otherwise we should have heard."

"'Tis too soon to assume that," he objected dubiously. "News travels slowly, and I think we ought not to be too sure."

"Come, come, Mr. Burgoyne; be not so gloomy," she rallied him. "How long do you think 'twill be ere we may deem him safe?"

"At least three weeks from the time he went away."

She smiled to herself in the darkness, and with apparent irrelevance she asked.

"See you the moon yonder?"

"Aye."

"She is scarce five days old," she announced.

"So I should have guessed," he said, wondering at her seemingly trivial mood.

"She has a name, Mr. Burgoyne—a name beloved by the country folk. Can you guess it?"

"You mean Oliver?" he hazarded.

She made a grimace which he could not see. "Indeed I don't, sir," she cried indignantly. "'Tis a much prettier name than that—akin to one you once gave her when you spoke of her to me."

She heard him catch his breath sharply. "Is it the harvest moon?" he asked, in low tones.

She paused a moment ere she replied: "No, 'tis the hunter's moon."

"What!" he cried incredulously. "The hunter's moon! How long, then, have I lain here?"

"Over six weeks," she replied.

"Impossible!"

Very quietly she told him of his weeks of delirium—of the agony of body and mind through which he had passed. And

finally, in a very low voice, she told him what the doctor had said regarding his wish to die.

For a long time after she had finished he lay silent and still; then he said quietly:

"You and Miss Ravenscourt nursed me all that time?"

"Yes." The monosyllable came in a whisper.

"And you say that moon is the hunter's moon?"

"Yes," she said again.

He sighed wearily. "That was a foolish vow I made, Lady Averill," he said sadly. "'Twas made to be broken, it seems. Will you forgive me for having made it?"

"What is there to forgive?" she asked softly. "And 'twas not altogether your fault that 'twas broken."

He sat up suddenly in bed. "What mean you, Averill?" he cried urgently.

"I mean that—that Fate robbed you of—of a full three weeks," she faltered, thankful for the darkness that hid her face from him.

"And is that all?" The eagerness had gone from his voice, and he sank back among his pillows.

"What else?" she queried lightly.

"Oh, nothing; nothing at all," he replied wearily. "Just for a moment I thought your words had a deeper significance but——"

He did not finish the sentence. Instead, he fixed his eyes on the sinking moon, and let his mind drift away into dreams of what might have been if only the gods had permitted him to keep his vow. How long he dreamed thus he did not know, but presently he found that Averill's hand lay on the coverlet beside his. He knew it was there, not because he could see it, but because he could feel its touch, and instinctively his fingers closed over it. To his surprise, it was not withdrawn, and so he lay grasping it but speaking never a word.

Presently her voice—tremulous and uncertain it seemed to Stephen—came to him out of the darkness.

"Mr. Burgoyne, was—was the doctor right when he—he said that you—you did not wish to get better?" she asked.

She felt his fingers twitch spasmodically. "Yes, I think he was," he replied evenly.

"But—but why?"

"Ah, how can I tell that? My mind was disordered, you know," he said quickly.

"Yes, but I mean since you became conscious," she persisted. "The doctor says that your slow progress is due to your indifference."

"Does he? Well, he may be right. There is none to care whether I live or die, so why should I trouble?"

Suddenly, to Stephen's surprise and dismay, a hot tear splashed on the back of the hand which held hers, and she broke into a passion of weeping.

"You have no right to say such things," she sobbed. "Have—have you forgotten your friends, Harry and Sylvia among others, and—and me?"

"You!" he echoed.

"Yes, me. Don't you count me as a friend?"

"No!" The word came so abruptly that she checked her tears in astonishment.

"What?" she cried. "Not after all these weeks of nursing you?"

"No," he repeated obstinately.

She said no more, and Stephen thought that he had wounded her past forgiveness. But could he have seen her face he would have noted that her eyes shone like stars, and that a glad little smile curved the corners of her mouth. Presently her hand was withdrawn from his, but before he had time to regret its going her dewy lips were pressed close against his cheek. And he could scarce believe the evidence of his own senses until he heard her say, in a shy and thrilling whisper:

"Then, Stephen, if you will not have me for a friend will you take me as a wife?"

But he could not speak. The wonder of it was too great, and she, thinking that he hesitated, whispered again:

"Have you not punished me enough, dear? Or is it that your love is mine no longer?"

For answer his arms, made suddenly strong by the racing, riotous blood that coursed in his veins, went round her and held her close. His lips sought hers, and for a long time not another word was spoken. Then she lifted her head abruptly, and pushed him away.

"Stephen, how could you be so cruel as to force me to offer myself to you?" she reproached him pensively.

"I did no such thing, Averill," he protested in amazement.

"You did, you did!" she declared vehemently. "For had I done otherwise, as soon as you were well you would have left me without a word, now wouldn't you?"

"Perhaps I should," he agreed, quite seriously.

"I knew it," she cried triumphantly. "And perhaps I deserved it." She sighed. "I wonder if ever, in the days that are to come, you will wish that I had let you go."

THE END